

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

55 words and phrases impacting our understanding of the Scriptures

by

Dr. O. William Cooper

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DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	iii
In Dedication.....	v
Introduction.....	1
1. This Body Of Death	5
2. Stolen Teraphim	7
3. Jesus was Silent at His Trial.....	9
4. Daughters	11
5. Fulfill the Law.....	13
6. Forgiveness.....	17
7. The Leprosy Law	21
8 The Light of the World.....	25
9. Milk and Honey.....	27
10. The Other Side.....	31
11. The Hem of His Garment	33
12. The Second Mile.....	35
13. Do You Love Me?.....	37
14. Light Under a Bushel	41
15. The Inn	45
16. This Cup.....	47
17. He Took Bread	51
18. The Wine.....	55
19. Where Two or Three are Gathered	57
20. Washing Feet.....	61
21. Broken Legs	63
22. The City of David.....	65
23. A House on a Rock.....	67
24. As I Walked Along.....	69
25. The Pit.....	71
26-36 The Prodigal Sons	75
26. The Father Ran To Greet His Son	77
27. The Very Best Robe.....	79
28. A Ring for His Finger.....	83
29. The Fatted Calf.....	85
30. Let's Have a Feast	87
31. Dead and Alive.....	89
32. The Kiss	91
33. Sandals	93
34. Father	97
35. The Pleading Father.....	99
36. The Son's Refusal	103
37. An Issue of Blood.....	105
38. The Voice in the Wilderness.....	109

TABLE OF CONTENTS

39.	Walk Through the Land	113
40.	'Pruning' Means 'Lifting'	115
41.	Baldness Between the Eyes	117
42.	Cast the First Stone	119
43.	Lowering Food in a Sheet.....	123
44.	John's Clothing and Food.....	125
45.	Go In and Out.....	129
46.	The Lamb	131
47.	Jephteha's Daughter	133
48.	Did David Dance Naked Before the Ark?	135
49.	The Protection of my Roof	139
50.	An Earnest.....	141
51.	Peter on the Housetop.....	143
52.	Thieves in Scribe's Clothing	145
53.	Thirty Pieces of Silver.....	149
54.	A Covenant of Salt	151
55.	Just Say the Word.....	155
56.	Where Are My Shoes	157
	Conclusion.....	159

IN DEDICATION

To my wife, Ruth, who during the 38 years of our courtship and marriage gave me the freedom to minister, study and write; who saw herself as sharing in ministry with me; who never once during that time ever offered a word of complaint or regret:

To my children, Ruth and Kiel, who accepted the ministry as "ours" when at times it would have been much more fun doing other things:

With deep gratitude, I humbly dedicate this book.

O. William Cooper

INTRODUCTION

Good writing reflects the culture and ideas of the time in which it was written. The Bible was written in such a way that the culture and the values of that day are reflected appropriately. By this means it is often possible to determine a document's date of authorship. For example, when the writer of Genesis spoke of the well on the road to Egypt, this was a reference to something that everyone in that area recognized. However, we, as modern readers unfamiliar with the terminology and idioms of the times, can only know about these things as we attempt to rediscover the history and customs of that day.

If the term "cold war" were used in an undated, English-language document, we would know that it was written after World War II because we were not aware of the term until then. If an article written in English contained the word "perestroika," we could be quite certain that it was written after 1988. Most had never heard of this Russian word before Mikhail Gorbachev used it to describe the changes he wanted to effect in the Soviet Union.

A sentence may also express some very strong emotional content which the words themselves are unable to convey. For example, the word "depression" spoken to a person born around 1930 would probably cause him to think of bread lines, bank foreclosures, moving in with relatives and being out of work. On the other hand, if born after 1960, that person's first thought might be of a dejected emotional state. Cultural references are a vital part of communication.

We believe that the Bible, according to II Timothy 3:16, is the inspired Word of God. Hebrews 1:1 affirms that God has spoken when it says,

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets... Hebrews 1:1a

The prophets were vessels through whom God revealed Himself to His people. Though it was a voice that we could not identify as tenor or bass, the words of the prophet were a message from God. It was through Isaiah that God spoke to His people Israel about forgiveness, speaking to them through both the words and the personality of the prophet.

"Come now, let us reason together, " says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Isaiah 1:18

As the epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, God spoke most clearly through His son, Jesus Christ, telling us that He is Love. This idea was expressed by letting us see God's love in the person and life of Jesus Christ, and by a host of illustrations and cultural details which allude to the Father's loving nature. God's people are reminded that He is both loving and just. By allowing them to witness Jesus forgiving the woman taken in adultery, God illustrated His love. He spoke of His justice by letting the Jewish leaders watch Jesus drive the money-changers out of the temple. Therefore, the clearest revelation of the personality and character of God can be seen in the person and life of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Throughout the ages God has spoken through the personalities of men like Abraham, Moses and Joshua, some of His most dedicated servants. The faithfulness of God to His people Israel was illustrated through the experiences which Abraham had with Jehovah; it was through the personality and experience of Moses that God displayed His concern for

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

purity and obedience. Through the leadership of Joshua and the ways in which God dealt with him, the greatness of His power was proclaimed.

God also revealed the inner depths of His own personality and character through the personality and writings of some of His chosen servants. It is no accident that the writings of the Apostle Peter were crisp and fast paced, because that was who Peter was. Yet through that kind of impulsive personality, God was able to reveal some of the most intricate and delicate truths about His own nature.

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul was sharp, concise, logical. You can see this trait of his personality on every page of the epistle to the Romans. Still God was able to take this very logical personality and through it express something of the deep emotion and compassion which is found in the Epistle to the Philippians.

The writing of Luke -- both the Gospel and the Book of Acts -- are filled with pieces of detailed human data characteristic of the physician he was. Nevertheless, God was able to use the meticulous personality of Luke to convey some of the most emotional, human portraits of Jesus to be found in any Gospel.

The nature and human temperament of the writer is distinctive and identifiable; God used them to provide us with delicate, incisive pictures of His own character and personality.

He even used human languages to give us further insight. The romantic, emotional nature of the Hebrew language was an excellent vehicle through which God could reveal something of the intense passion He held for Israel, as well as the burning justice with which He confronted His erring people. It was not accidental that He spoke of these glimpses of Himself through the Hebrew language.

On the other hand, when He wanted to speak in precise, less emotional, almost scientific terms, God chose to use the Greek and Aramaic. The crispness of their expression and incisive precision of their word choices reveal the delicate detail of the doctrine and mode of living that Christians must observe to be a follower of Jesus.

The Greek New Testament is an illustration of this. It uses thirty-seven different words to convey various shades of a word which, in the English versions, is simply translated as "bring." By choosing the Greek and Aramaic languages, God opened a whole palette of specific meanings which would have been extremely limited had He chosen to reveal Himself in the English language. The choice of languages and specific words enabled God to impart a clearer revelation of Himself to the people who love Him.

The people to whom Paul wrote knew him and the cultural background in which his thinking was formulated; thus they were able to grasp cultural references which now elude the casual reader who is not familiar with the Apostle and his culture.

In picking up a Bible, we often encounter words and ideas which do not become clear even with accurate translation. Because we do not know the language in which Paul wrote and are not familiar with the cultural details of that time and locale, we need help in understanding these portions of Scripture. Finding the most accurate translation possible still does not tell us what the text means when speaking about such things as "shaving the front of your head for the dead," as mentioned in Deuteronomy 14:1, 2.

On one occasion Jesus talked about His presence and said, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20). Why, you might wonder, did He choose the numbers "two" or "three?" To what was Jesus referring in this

INTRODUCTION

statement? An awareness of Hebrew religious customs and regulations would give insights into this questions.

Modern Bible readers tend to gloss over any word or concept which is not a part of their understanding. This results in the fact that many passages are either misunderstood or simply ignored. It happens because the reader lacks an understanding of the cultural meaning and does not know how to find that meaning.

Over the years, people have repeatedly asked questions about some of these terms and ideas which seem to have no meaning for us today. Still others either do not read such passages or believe things that are not true about these Scriptural statements.

As a result of this confusion and the need for understanding, a collection of these words and ideas has been compiled. The intention is to develop an understanding of the words or statements involved. Our hope is that this information will enable the reader to understand portions of the Scriptures more completely and therefore discern God's will more fully.

We are always indebted to those who have taught us either in the classroom or through the things they taught or wrote. We can remember some of these, but never all of them. Many of the ideas in this book were discovered in classrooms, books and trips to the Holy Land. Though I do not remember the names of the works I read or the authors to whom I listened, I gladly acknowledge that I am the beneficiary of the skill and accumulated wisdom of hosts of scholars who preceded me.

Several people have helped with the preparation of this volume. Proof reading was painstakingly pursued by Ms. Marilyn Burns, Ms. Sharon Spicka, and Mr. David Arnes. I am deeply indebted to them. Mr. Tom Houston designed the cover and Dr. Peter Stone assisted with computer design and graphics. Without their help this task would have been much more difficult to complete.

Dr. James Fleming, of Biblical Resources in Jerusalem, has had a major impact on my understanding. I am deeply indebted to him for his great skills.

The bold print in quotations from Scripture was placed there by this author for purposes of emphasis. This is to enable persons to pronounce the words though they do not know the language.

THIS BODY OF DEATH

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Romans 7:24

This exclamation sounds like a very graphic way of speaking, but the truth is that Paul was referring to a legal situation. Though Paul's readers were aware of that to which he was referring, the modern reader is not.

Just as we, in the American legal system, deal with the crime of murder in terms of first, second and third degree, the Roman legal system described several levels of guilt for this offense. The above verse was referring to one of the most severe punishments of Roman law. The dead body was literally chained to the murderer -- face to face, hand to hand, toe to toe. The condemned man was sentenced to go through the remainder of his life chained to this decaying corpse. Keep in mind the acceleration of the decomposing process in that warm climate; then try to imagine how it would be with this body in front of you while eating or in attempting to talk to your wife and children. Imagine the horror as each day the stench becomes increasingly offensive, bringing alienation from family and friends, depriving you of tenderness or intimacy with another human being. As the decaying corpse becomes rigid -- stiff -- when rigor mortis sets in, sitting down becomes virtually impossible. Sleep escapes you as **death permeates** every waking moment. Each day the stench grows worse and becomes increasingly more offensive, both to you and everyone around you. Therefore, you are progressively more isolated from family and friends. There is no escape from the reminder of your crime.

The murderer could not avoid breathing in the stench of this decaying body which was his constant companion. It is not difficult to understand that many times the condemned man would lose his mind if he did not first die of inhaled putrefaction.

What a picture of sin! Using his knowledge of Roman legal practice to draw a vivid comparison, Paul had been talking about Christians who sin. Though making a desperate attempt to live a sinless life, Paul became increasingly aware of the fact that the harder he tried, the more frustrating his failure became.

For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. Romans 7:1

Paul felt his sin was as much a burden strapped to him as the decaying body chained to a murderer had been. Oh, how we can identify with Paul's struggle! Forgiven, chosen to follow Jesus, we want to be obedient; but no matter how hard we try, there is still sin in our lives. Then Paul identifies our only hope,

Thanks be to God - Through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:25

Trying harder never solves the problem of sin in our lives. If there is to be a change, it will have to be the result of what Jesus Christ does in us. There is a conflict raging in the life of every Christian. The law of God does battle with the law of sin. But Paul reminds us in whom our hope lies even when we fail.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1

In reflecting upon our own lives, one can't help but see that struggle of the law of God versus the law of sin. Surely you have felt the frustration of the bondage of the murderer as you tried again and again to eliminate the power of sin in your life.

However, Paul reminds us that as we continue presenting our bodies to God as sacrifices that live, Jesus increasingly becomes the solution to the battle we have lost so often. Remember:

*There is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus... Romans 8:1*

No more stench! No more dead body to lug around! There is freedom -- total freedom in Christ!

STOLEN TERAPHIM

Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's house. But why did you steal my gods? Genesis 31:30

There are several issues in the story of Jacob and Laban which have escaped the notice of many readers. One of these has to do with the teraphim stolen by Rachel from her father Laban.

A teraph was a household idol. These idols were small enough to be successfully hidden under a camel's saddle. (The exact use of these idols is an object of some controversy, but we know that in some way these idols were used in divination.)

There are at least two schools of thought involved here. One group of scholars holds that the teraphim were merely household gods and the reason for Laban's anxiety upon finding them missing was that he was afraid of the wrath of his household deity for allowing the images to be stolen.

Another group of scholars holds that Laban had no son, when Jacob came seeking a wife, he was therefore treated as an adopted son. These scholars believe that in later years, Laban did have a son and thus no longer needed or desired Jacob as his heir. In some segments of that culture, the possession of the family idols was a symbol of the designated heir. In such a situation, by taking the teraphim -- the symbol of the heir of the family ¹ -- Rachel would have been attempting to **preserve her husband's claim** on the inheritance, which she felt was rightfully his.

Whichever the case, the teraphim were of great significance to everyone in this story. Laban considered them so important that he chased Jacob for three days, risking a violent confrontation in order to regain his idols. Rachel was willing to steal from her own father in order to secure her husband's claim on the inheritance.

No one can say with absolute confidence which of these positions is correct. However, to me it appears that the possession of these images did in fact identify the family heir. Though Rachel may have been seizing these household gods to worship in her new homeland, apparently she was also attempting to secure proof that her husband was Laban's rightful heir; for without the idols they could inherit nothing.

We must acknowledge that the Scriptures do not tell us what happened to the estate of Laban. The information given does not support the idea that Jacob received anything; nor does it support the idea that Laban's inheritance was later given to a son. Only one thing is certain: because of Rachel's theft of the teraphim, the symbol of inheritance belonged to Jacob.

¹. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957) p.1084.

JESUS WAS SILENT AT HIS TRIAL

Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent. Matthew 26:62-63a

Can you imagine a person remaining silent when on trial for his life?

In the above text, Jesus was standing trial before Caiaphas, the High Priest appointed by the Curator Valerius Gratus. His father-in-law, Annas, was the proper High Priest, but Caiaphas was appointed to the position by Roman authorities in order to give Rome some control in the religious affairs of the Jews.

Witnesses and false witnesses were brought before the Sanhedrin; but Jesus said nothing in His own defense. It would have been in the best interest of the Pharisees and other religious leaders if Jesus had defended Himself. Then they might have been able to trap Him into saying something which could have been turned against Him. In utter frustration, Caiaphas blurted out his question to Jesus, "are you not going to answer?"

If you just consider the literal words of the text, it would be easy to misunderstand the meaning of this incident because there are many seemingly logical explanations for Jesus' silence.

It could be that Jesus was just being stubborn by refusing to speak. On the other hand, it is conceivable that He was expressing a strong nationalism by refusing to cooperate with the High Priest appointed by the puppet regime of Rome. Possibly Jesus was communicating a strong determination not to become involved in their attempts to trip Him up. It could just as easily have been His way of manifesting a radical dependence upon God. Each of these suggestions has some degree of possibility and acceptance by readers of the text.

A possibility that seems even more plausible is that Jesus may have been exhibiting a "radical" integrity. By this we mean a voluntary adherence to truth or obedience to the law which is to be observed, not from a fear of detection, but because of one's personal commitment to truth and obedience to the law and the commands of Scripture. A modern example of this is the way many devout Christians seem to observe speed limits out of fear of detection and punishment rather than from a desire to obey the Scriptural command of submitting to those authorities who are placed over them.

Intent on keeping the Law, in Old Testament times the Jews "built a hedge around the law." Because they were so intent on keeping the Law, they went further than the Law required. They established extra-biblical criteria which were more stringent than the law of Moses itself. These Jews felt that if they completely observed these stringent criteria, they would never violate the Law itself.

Look at an illustration of this idea. In Leviticus, there is a clear command from God,

I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy. Leviticus 11:45

The ancient "fathers" would have been asked, "Fine, but what does that mean?" They would have been on the spot, because it was extremely important to obey this command,

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

but God did not give them specifics about it. They, therefore, set down a long list of things that would help their people to keep this very important, but general commandment.

Some of these criteria demand that they were not to touch any "unclean" thing, such as a dead body, for that would make them unclean. They were not to touch or eat any "unclean" food. They were to have no dealings with Gentiles. They were to avoid all contact with tax collectors and sinners (thieves, murderers and prostitutes). Though these criteria are not spelled out in the command to be holy, as far as the Jews were concerned, they were the criteria for fulfilling this injunction.

The term "sinners" was used to describe two groups of people: those who lived an immoral lifestyle, i.e., those guilty of adultery, prostitution or defrauding others; and people who took part in a dishonorable vocation, i.e., tax collecting. Both groups were forever deprived of their civil rights. They could never hold public office; they were excluded from polite society; they were considered in the same category as shepherds, leather workers, donkey-drivers and shyster peddlers. Among the Jews, there were dire consequences for anyone who was personally involved with such people. To have any dealings with them would mean being forever barred from acting as a witness in court.

On a number of occasions, Jesus ate with publicans and "sinners" and associated with Samaritans and other Gentiles. He publicly accepted Zacchaeus' invitation to dinner and may have been his over-night guest. This would disqualify Jesus from ever being a witness in court. Jesus had daily contacts, for a number of years, with Levi, Matthew, the tax collector. All of these incidents would forever disqualify Him from witnessing in court, even on His own behalf.

It seems Jesus' radical commitment to truth and obedience to law may have silenced Him at His own trial. It was immaterial to Him whether those in authority would or would not remember to invoke the rule concerning the loss of the right to witness in court through association with tax-collectors, sinners and prostitutes. It would be immaterial to Him. Jesus had knowingly set aside His right to witness in court when He ministered to these needy, outcast people. Thus, Jesus answered questions when required to do so, but did not speak a word in his own defense.

We believe that this is what Philip was explaining to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:32. The Ethiopian wondered at the meaning of these words.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Isaiah 53:7

DAUGHTERS

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! Zephaniah 3:14

Because the word "daughter" is used frequently in the Psalms and other poetic portions of Scripture, we tend to interpret it literally more often than was intended.

In Scripture the word "daughter" is used in at least two ways:

1. To identify a female child.
2. To identify the small, unprotected clusters of dwellings which surrounded walled cities.

Bethlehem, Bethphage and Bethany were "daughters of Jerusalem." It is as though the great city had several off-spring.

In the Old Testament there are several references to "daughters" of cities:

1. Daughter of Gallim (Isaiah 10:30)
2. Daughter of Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:22)
3. Daughter of Egypt (Jeremiah 46:11)
4. Daughter of Edom (Lamentation 4:21)

In the book of Judges the author said,

But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Iblean or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements. Judges 1:27

A more precise translation of the Hebrew text might be,

*...of Bethshean, and its daughters, of Taanach and its daughters, the dwellers of Dor and its daughters, Iblean and its daughters, Megiddo and its daughters...
Judges 1:27*

The Sons of Korah referred to the "daughter of Tyre" in Psalms 45:12. Tyre, like many walled cities, was surrounded by small settlements -- clusters of dwellings -- that were outside the protection of the city wall. The people who lived in these unprotected settlements were the source of food and wares for those in the city. Often these items were provided at low cost or given as gifts in an attempt to curry the favor of those who, they hoped, would share their safety in time of need. These settlements were called "daughters."

What actually happened was quite different. The generosity of the poor people outside the walls was accepted; however, when trouble came, the city gates were locked and those who inhabited the "daughters" had to either flee or be plundered by the attacking army who would take them as captives to become slaves.

FULFILL THE LAW

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Mt. 5:17,18

This is part of the Sermon on the Mount, the legal code of the Kingdom of God. There have been some who, in their reading of this passage, have thought of these words as picturesque speech, pleasant sounding words. This they are, but they are more.

We need to ask ourselves some careful questions about what Jesus said. What did He mean when He said he had come to "fulfill" the Law and the Prophets.

First of all, it is appropriate to point out that Matthew is **not** saying that Jesus terminated the law which God had given Moses at Sinai.

The word which Jesus used was "plerosai", which means to "fill something completely, to make something totally full". This word could be used to describe that phase of the moon called "full". It could also be used to describe something or someone who is satisfied, having partaken to or beyond the point of satisfaction or comfort. The form of this Greek word is First Aorist Active Infinitive, which leads to a more careful understanding of, "to fill them full once and for all." Kittel adds a very helpful insight when he said,

It can only mean full measure. The noun, however, underlines the overflowing wealth of the blessing with which Christ accompanies His apostle.¹

It has to do with weights and measures. The following quote will give you some idea of just how important this was to the Hebrew people.

If someone's measures, weights or scales are not accurate, they are to take them away from him and are to penalize him with a fine. If someone charges above the going prices, they are to compel him to sell at the market prices. The punishment [by heaven] over weights and measures is more severe than the punishment for immorality; he [the guilty person] is as one who denies the exodus from Egypt.²

"Fulfill" was commonly used in the market place. The people of that day also had trouble with inaccurate measures. The sellers of grain used an omer (just over two and one half quarts) as a common measure. One seller would fill the measure almost to the top, whereas another would fill it level full. This prompted an agreement: their standard measure was to place the Omer in a larger vessel of grain and fill the omer until the grain over-

¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Ed., *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*, VI (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 196, p. 302

² The Chafetz Chayim, *The Concise Book of Mitzvoth*, (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1990) p. 173

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

flowed on all sides. It was then "fulfilled" or filled full; so the term " full-measure" (plerosai) was commonly used in the marketplace.

The statement of Jesus about fulfilling the Law and Prophets, was a simile. Just as the grain measure was filled up when it runs over the sides, so the Law was brought to its intended meaning and purpose through the presence and teaching of Jesus Christ.

It is not surprising that the balance of the chapter is a series of illustrations of how the Law was filled to the top of its meaning in Jesus Christ. He used these examples because they were very well known to every person who heard Him speak on this occasion.

Notice the ways with which Jesus demonstrates that He fills the Law "up to the very top". At that time, people thought of the Pharisees as the prime example of obedience to the Law. But Jesus said that one had to go far beyond their observance to be acceptable before God - what a shocking statement!

In Matthew 5:21-26, Jesus uses the illustration of murder. He said,

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder.'...but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Matthew 5:21

The unfulfilled Law forbade the act of murder. The "fulfilled" Law, in Jesus Christ, was more demanding yet. Jesus was saying that the fulfillment of the Law, which He brought, was that we will not only think in terms of the act of murder, we will even seek to be restored to those with whom we have harsh thoughts. This is far more demanding than the forbidding of the actual act of murder.

In Matthew 5:27-30, Jesus deals with the act of adultery. He said,

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Matthew 5:27, 28

Again, the old Law forbade the **act** of adultery. The fulfillment of the Law, which Jesus brought, forbids the **thought** of adultery. This is a vastly higher standard than the old Law which was given to Moses.

In Matthew 5:31,32, Jesus deals with the experience of divorce. He said,

It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. Matthew 5:31,32

The old Law required that a man must give his wife a certificate of divorce if he divorced her. He could do that for any reason, even a simple thing such as burning his dinner. The fulfilled Law, which Jesus brought, demanded that divorce no longer be a whim of the husband, but that he be considerate of the wife being sent away. This was totally new and intensely more stringent than the old understanding of the Law.

The old Law forbade the breaking of an oath. Jesus said it this way,

FULFILL THE LAW

Again you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all; either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Mt. 5:33-37

Under the old Law, one need only be careful to keep the oath he made. The fulfilled Law, through Jesus Christ, was far more demanding. He instructed His disciples to live in such a way that the level of their integrity, in the minds of people, would render an oath unnecessary. It required that they and we remember that there is nothing of our own on which to base our oath. Therefore it behooves us not to make one at all.

Again, Jesus offered another example which dealt with the act of revenge. He said,

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:38-42

The old legal system allowed for revenge. The fulfilled Law, which Jesus brought, however, makes it clear that there is no place for revenge. It requires that we seek a way to serve those who harm us and give kindness to those who offer abuse.

Jesus reminded them of the old Law concerning enemies. He said,

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Matthew 5:43, 44

The Law, which Jesus filled to the top, called upon the people of God to return love for hate, prayer for persecution.

Giving to the needy was not a new idea, but Jesus gave it a new perspective when He said to them,

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. ...So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be honored by men. Matthew 6:1, 2

In keeping with the old system, some people would give to the poor, but they would have a trumpeter go ahead of them so that everyone would know about the kindness they extended to the needy. Their concern was their reputation, not the need of the destitute. Jesus filled the Law "up to the top" by instructing His disciples to give quietly out of concern for the needy, not for their own image.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Prayer was a vital part of the old Law. Jesus offered His disciples a better way. He said,

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.... When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Matthew 6:5, 6

Under the old system, the ultimate purpose of some prayers was to make an impression on other people. Jesus filled the Law "up to the top" by insisting that the motive for prayer was fellowship with God and deep concern for human need. It is an experience which is void of personal advantage. This is filling the Law "up to the top".

Jesus continued with this explanation when talking about fasting, about the purpose of riches, about worry and about judging others. In each instance, filling the Law "up to the top" required a greater commitment to God than the previous understanding of the Law.

When Jesus talked about "fulfilling the Law" He was not talking about the termination of the Law. Jesus was saying that He came to invest the Law with every ounce of meaning God intended it to contain; to bring people to a purity of thought as well as of careful action which was always God's will for the people of His Kingdom.

FORGIVENESS

Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples dared ask him 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. John 21:12-14

You will recognize these verses as an encounter between Jesus and His disciples, after the resurrection and after the disciples had been fishing all night. To some it may appear that Jesus was simply being cordial by providing His disciples something warm to eat after a cold night on the Sea of Galilee; but it is far more than that.

Remember that the disciples must have been more than a bit uncomfortable in Jesus' presence since the resurrection. They had denied knowing Jesus and had not been immediately present at the crucifixion, viewing the experience from a great distance. The Gospels tell us that though the disciples vowed not to forsake Jesus, that promise was broken.

But now the resurrected Jesus stood before them, and they had to deal with their unfaithfulness. To characterize their feelings as uncomfortable would be mild; deeply guilty is perhaps more realistic.

Jesus, the master teacher, was about to give His followers another lesson. The ways in which Jesus taught His disciples were numerous, emphasizing His verbal instructions by His actions and stressing His verbal teachings and actions through example. On top of all this, Jesus often used symbols. The Jewish symbols of forgiveness are a case in point.

Among the Jews there were at least three and perhaps four graphic ways to express forgiveness:

1. The kiss -- In the parable of the prodigal son, some say the father's kiss was his cultural symbol of forgiveness.
2. Giving a person salt to be eaten with you was symbolic of reconciliation.
3. Bringing the person into one's home was an extension of the hand of forgiveness.
4. Finally, eating with the guilty party vividly displayed a forgiving act.

Jesus and eleven uncomfortable, very guilty disciples sat in the sand around the fire preparing to eat a meal. Though it was time to eat, I suspect that the purpose of the meal was not to satisfy hunger, but to deal with their guilt.

There are several Scriptural examples of this act of forgiveness. Jacob with his family and flocks had stolen away from Laban, his father-in-law. Chasing Jacob for three days, Laban not only demanded that his idols be returned, but he insisted that he and Jacob have a meal together. The relationship between them had never been the best, and it certainly wasn't a "Thanksgiving sized" meal with his daughter and grand-children that Laban was desiring. Rather, he could not allow Jacob to go away angry. If he did, Laban would always be afraid that Jacob would return with armed men to fight against him and destroy all that he had. To prevent this, Laban insisted that they eat the meal of forgiveness together.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father instructed his servants to prepare a feast. Certainly there was joy that his son had returned, but the driving force behind this command to prepare a feast was to let the wandering son and the whole community know, in

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

very graphic terms, that he was forgiven. On the other hand, the older son's refusal to attend the banquet was an explicit display of his unforgiveness. It was his graphic way of saying to his father, "You may forgive your son, but that does not mean that I forgive him."

Passing through Jericho, Jesus called to Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector:

Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. Luke 19:5

Jesus did something that normally would never have been done in that culture; He invited Himself to be a guest in the home of a tax collector. No one in the community would have entered a tax collector's home under any circumstances because they were considered traitors. To enter that home would make a person unclean in the community and bar him from being a witness in court for the rest of his life. But it was not Zacchaeus who had put Jesus in an awkward position by extending an invitation which Jesus could not politely turn down. By becoming this man's guest, Jesus was offering him two specific forms of forgiveness -- entering his house and eating a meal with him. Jesus initiated the situation by requesting the opportunity to be the guest of Zacchaeus. These symbols were not wasted on the people of Jericho. In seeing this, they immediately began to murmur about the fact that Jesus had become the guest of a sinner.

Showing forgiveness by eating with the guilty party was an ancient Jewish custom. If you again read the story in Genesis (chap. 45), you will note that it was neither in the court nor in the street that Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. He invited his brothers to eat **in his house**. It was when they were eating a festive meal with him in his home that he said:

...I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here. Genesis 45:5

If Joseph's brothers had not been so frightened, they would have remembered that he had just extended two forms of cultural forgiveness to them -- a meal at his table, in his house. These were two of the strongest expressions of forgiveness among their people.

Joseph spent some time reassuring them that he was, in fact, their lost brother and that he wanted them to bring their father to him. Notice what else took place.

*Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping, and he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. **Afterward his brothers talked with him.** Genesis 45:14, 15*

It was only after Joseph had given them the third expression of forgiveness - the kiss - that they were able to talk with him. His brothers were beginning to believe that they were really forgiven.

As a Jew, David was also aware of this symbol of forgiveness when he wrote,

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Psalm 23:5

FORGIVENESS

It was not that God would feed David on the battlefield, but that David experienced the forgiveness of God when everyone else around him was angry and unforgiving.

Do you remember, in the book of Revelation, the words Jesus spoke to the church at Laodicea, a church that was reprimanded for its lack of commitment?

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. Revelation 3:20

Is it possible that what Jesus was referring to was the symbol of forgiveness--eating together in the home--which was universally understood by the Jews? That's my belief, and the people clearly understood it.

There are many more examples of this to be found in Scripture. In every instance forgiveness is the issue at hand. The Gospel message is brilliantly clear and oft repeated: no matter how guilty we are or what our station in life may be, the forgiveness of God is always available.

THE LEPROSY LAW

...When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said, 'be clean!' and immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, 'Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.' Lu 5:12b-16

In this particular passage, Jesus was teaching in a Galilean town near the Sea of Galilee. As the text indicates, Jesus met a man with a very advanced case of leprosy.

There are several parts of this brief paragraph which might escape notice. Let us look at each one separately.

In the first part of verse 12, Luke writes,

While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. Luke 5:12a

It appears that Jesus encountered the leprous man **in the city**. Jewish law, however, required that a person with leprosy had to stay away from every place where uninfected people might be. This was particularly true of the cities or villages. These people were literally ostracized from society, living in caves and confining themselves outside every city or village. They never, under any circumstances, entered an inhabited area. They never encountered anyone except other people with leprosy. If they strayed too close to uninfected people, they would be pelted with stones. This leper was definitely violating the law concerning his confinement.

Luke tells us:

When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' Luke 5:12b

This was unusual. Whenever a person with leprosy encountered a person who was not infected, the leper was required to cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" It appears that in this instance the leper was so intent on getting Jesus to heal him that he failed to cry out as he was required to do.

According to the text, Jesus did not scold the man for his inappropriate action:

Jesus reached out and touched the man. Luke 5:13a

This would have been a shock to anyone in the village, because no one would ever touch a person who had leprosy, which was highly contagious. To put yourself in serious risk of contracting the disease was forbidden. By the same token, any person who touched an individual who had contracted the disease was ceremonially unclean, and could not participate in the worship of the community until a certain amount of time passed to make sure that they were not infected.

After Jesus healed the man, Jesus gave him a command:

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Go show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing. Luke 5:14b

Jesus was referring to a law that every Jew knew quite well.

According to Leviticus 13, it was the priest who examined the leper and pronounced him clean or unclean. The former victim had to present himself to the priest, outside the camp, for his observation. If the priest agreed that the disease had been cured, he would pronounce the patient "clean." At that point the cured person was required to make the prescribed sacrifices.

You will find these requirements in Leviticus 14:

1. Bring two live, clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hissop.
2. Kill one bird over fresh water in a clay pot.
3. Dip the live bird, cedar wood, scarlet yarn, hissop into the blood.
4. The priest must sprinkle the one to be cleansed with blood seven times.
5. The priest would pronounce him clean.
6. The man must wash his clothes.
7. Shave all his hair.
8. Bathe with water;
9. He is now ceremonially clean! With all of this accomplished, and being ceremonially clean, the former leper was still not accepted back into the community. There were still other requirements.
10. Now the healed leper may enter the camp or city, but not his tent or home for seven days.
11. After seven days he must again shave all the hair from his body,
12. Wash his clothes,
13. Bathe with water,
14. He is now clean! However, he then was required to:
 - a. On the eighth day bring two male lambs, and one ewe lamb one year old. All must be without defect.
 - b. He must bring an ephah of fine flour, mixed with oil, a grain offering.
 - c. He must also bring one log of oil (about one half pint).
 - d. The priest then presented the one to be cleansed and the above offerings at the door of the tabernacle or temple.
 - e. Then the priest offered one male lamb and the oil as a guilt offering.
 - f. The lamb and oil was to be waved before the Lord as a wave offering, which was given this name because of the way in which it was performed.

The offering was placed upon the hands of the offerer, and after putting his hands under those of the offerer, the priest moved the whole backward and forward, constituting a horizontal movement. ¹

¹ Merrill F. Unger, Op. Cit., p. 950

THE LEPROSY LAW

7. A lamb was slaughtered at the temple where sin and guilt offerings were slaughtered.
8. The lamb was holy and therefore belonged to the priest.
9. The priest must place some of the blood on the lobe of the cured man's right ear, on his right thumb, and on the big toe of his right foot.
10. The priest took some of the oil in the palm of his hand.
11. The priest shall dip his right forefinger into the oil and sprinkle it before the Lord seven times.
12. The priest was to put some of the remaining oil on right ear lobe, right thumb, right toe, on top of the blood that was already there.
13. The priest placed the remaining oil on the head of the one to be cleansed.
14. This sacrifice and anointing was to make atonement for the victim.
15. The priest then offered the sin offering for the victim.
16. The priest then slaughters the burnt offering, which could be a young bullock, a ram, or a he-goat. This sacrifice was given this name because the animal was to be completely consumed, by fire, with the exception of the skin. This offering was a symbol of entire surrender to God.
17. This is offered on the altar with the ephah of flour, to make atonement for the victim.
18. He is now pronounced clean!

There is another procedure **if** the person is poor.

1. Take one male lamb as guilt offering.
2. Take a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil.
3. Take a log of oil -- one half pint.
4. Take two doves or two young pigeons -- one for a sin offering, one for a burnt offering.
5. Otherwise the instructions are the same.

These few words of instruction which Jesus gave the healed leper, set in motion a very long and involved procedure. By touching the leprous man, Jesus made it very clear that He was more concerned about the man than about the disease. Remember, the purpose of this was not so the person would be healed of his disease; that was already accomplished.

Go show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them. Luke 5:14

Jesus was clearly using this miracle not only to heal the man, but also to witness to the priests. He wanted them to know that there was one present who could heal such devastating diseases.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

The Apostle John, in his Gospel record, includes a number of dramatic pictures of Jesus. One of these he described in this quotation from Jesus:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. John 8:12

In reading this verse, many see "I am the light of the world" as something of a title for Jesus. It would be an appropriate title for Him, but that is not what Jesus had in mind when He said it.

Jesus made this statement at a specific time and place. If you look at the context, you will find a hint concerning this time and place in the preceding chapter:

But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, 'You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do..'. John 7:2,3

In the text which follows, we find Jesus waiting until others had gone and then He went up to Jerusalem. He made the "light of the world" statement during the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Feast of Tabernacles is now called "Succoth," which means "hut." It is also called the Feast of Booths or the Festival of Ingathering. It is one of three festivals where the Jews were to participate in the temple at Jerusalem. It is to remind Israel that when they came out of Egypt, God took care of them as they lived in tents and provided for all their needs.

In Jesus' time, on the last day of the feast, a giant menorah or seven branched candlestick was erected on the roof of the temple which was the highest point in the city. Remember that in the time of Jesus there were no street lights in the city. That night the menorah was lighted, and it was so large and the light from it was so bright that it lit up every street and alleyway in the whole city of Jerusalem! Every Jew in the city knew about this display of light from the temple roof, and they looked forward to seeing this great spectacle each year. It was against this background, and on that very day, that Jesus made the very meaningful statement, "I am the light of the world." To the discerning ear, Jesus was talking about something more important and exciting than **a bright light in the evening sky** in Jerusalem. Jesus was talking about His deity.

Light, at night, had great meaning to the Jews. During the time of the Exodus, God led His people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It was a symbol of God's presence and guidance to the people who had just been released from the drudgery of slavery. In the same vein, when the tabernacle was built, the presence of God was identified by the Shekinah Glory. This brilliant symbol was an indication of the Divine presence both in the tabernacle and on the road as they travelled. By the same token, Jesus was identifying Himself with that same presence of God. He was God, and would not only illuminate the streets of Jerusalem, or the Temple, but the **whole world!**

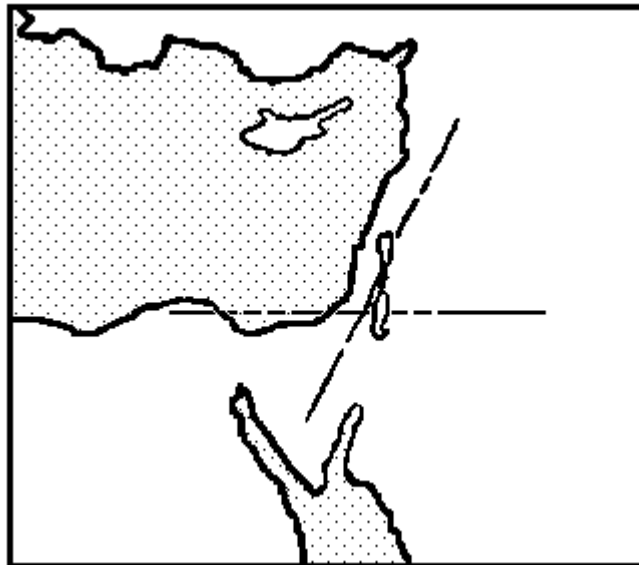
MILK AND HONEY

So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey - the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Ex. 3:8

Do you remember the first time you read these words in the Bible? I remember quite well! I thought that it was a slick paper, beautiful picture, Chamber of Commerce-type of description. In fact, it is a hyperbole -- an exaggeration intended not to deceive, but to stress a truth God wants to convey.

Notice that God used two different means to describe the area:

1. Tribal names that one can find on a map
2. The hyperbole intended to describe the area.



This map of the area pinpoints where these different groups were located. It will identify the location of the area God had in mind. The area above the dotted line, to the left, is "honey; the area below the line, to the right, is "milk." Did you ever say something like this: "I couldn't have done that in a thousand years"? Who has a thousand years to do anything? The message that this statement was intended to convey was, "I would never have been able to do that." God was not saying that there would be milk or sticky honey running down the hillsides of Canaan. He was saying that this was the kind of area He was giving to Israel.

This "milk and honey" phrase was used by God when He spoke to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3:8. The phrase appears in eight different Old Testament books for a total of 20 times. It apparently is not used in the New Testament.

"The land of milk and honey" was not irresponsible exaggeration. It was a symbolic way to describe exactly what the land was like. The words "milk" and "honey" were care-

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

fully chosen. Each is a very graphic way to describe the lands and their people in Israel. Both groups have characteristic types of land and people.

MILK

This group tends to be located in the south and south-east. The land is usually very low; the climate very hot. Qumram and the Dead Sea area are typical of the "milk" region. The weather is seriously affected by the fact that their land is located where two deserts meet -- the Arabian Desert on the east and the Sahara desert on the south ¹

These are desert people. They have three basic characteristics:

1. They are very unpredictable.
2. They are very lonely and quiet because they cannot survive if they live close together.
3. Life for them is most exhausting. The heat is intense and draining. The work is drudgery. The life expectancy of the people was short and less predictable, male, 45 years; female, 35 years. Most other Arabs have five to seven children per family, but these people have an average of one child per family. ²

The land in this region is quite barren and the soil very poor. Without heroic efforts, it is nearly impossible to grow crops in this area. Therefore these people are herdsmen who raise an assortment of sheep and goats. It is from these goats that they get the milk from which they make cheese, a major source of nourishment for the people.

HONEY

The other group was called "honey." This group was located in the north and western part of Palestine. They receive about 20 to 40 inches of rainfall annually. One needs only 11 inches of rain to grow winter wheat. In fact, there are areas of that land where two or more crops of grain are harvested each year.

The land is relatively high when compared with the Dead Sea, the lowest place on the face of the earth. The soil is very rich and fertile; the weather temperate. It is very easy to grow beautiful crops there.

The people in the area are quite different from those in the milk area. They too have general characteristics:

1. They are a gregarious, noisy people who tend to live in large cities, as opposed to those who live in the south. The largest cities in Palestine are in the honey area.
2. The "honey" people tend to be very predictable. You usually know how they will act and react. It is not surprising that the gods they served were as predictable as the people were. 3. Life was easier for them as opposed to the exhausting life of their neighbors to the south and east. The "honey" people had time for leisure and enjoyment.

¹ James Fleming, *Geography Of The Bible: Right And Left Stage*, Jerusalem: Biblical Resources, 1984) Tape

² Ibid.

MILK AND HONEY

4. They also had the disadvantage of being in the area of Palestine where devastating armies always plundered. In Megiddo there are at least 20 levels of cities that had been built and then destroyed by invading armies as they went across "The way of the Sea" to attempt military supremacy.³

Even today, these farmers grow just about all the food Israel needs and in some cases they have a surplus to export.

Life for the "honey" people is less tenuous than it is for the "milk" people. The "honey" people - people of the North -- tended to live considerably longer, also. Men might be expected to live to the age of 55 while women might be expected to live for 45 years. Galilee falls within the area of "honey."

Remember, God was responding to the cry of Israel against the abuse of the Egyptians. He gave Moses both a promise for the present and a hope on which to pin his expectations of the future. God is like that. He is sensitive to the cry of the abused. God provides great blessing to those who have suffered great loss.

When God spoke of "milk and honey," it was a figure of speech to describe the kind of land He was going to give Israel as they came out of Egypt.

³ Ibid.

THE OTHER SIDE

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. Mark 5:1

In some translations the text reads, "And when they came to **the other side** of the sea..." There is good reason to believe that prior to their discipleship with Jesus, most of the disciples had never been in a Gentile village or city at all. Most of the Jews were frankly frightened of the Gentiles and would do almost anything to avoid their presence; they would certainly not enter their villages.

At the time of Jesus, when the Jews had to go from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, they would have to go through Samaria. In order to avoid coming in contact with the Samaritans, they would go miles out of their way. They would cross over to the east side of the Jordan as soon after they passed Jericho as possible and travel north. Then, when they returned, they would again cross the Jordan River near its source at the south end of the Sea of Galilee and go east of the Jordan until they were near Judea again.

Whenever a Jew went to "the other side" he was entering a totally Gentile culture. On the east side of the Sea of Galilee was the Decapolis. The meaning of this compound Greek word is:

Deca - ten
Polis - cities

It was an area composed of ten Gentile cities. The names of these cities were:

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Dion | 6. Abila |
| 2. Philadelphia | 7. Pella |
| 3. Damascus | 8. Raphana |
| 4. Canatha | 9. Gerasa |
| 5. Gadara | 10. Scythopolis |

Only Scythopolis was on the west side of the Jordan. The other nine were on "the other side." Gerasa is the totally excavated city, now called Jerash, which is not far from the city of Philadelphia, now known as Amman, Jordan.

These ten cities were built by the Romans and were almost totally inhabited by Gentiles. At an intersection of two streets in these cities would be an altar to at least two gods. There would be shrines to their many gods in the middle of a city block. Almost everything in the city had some idolatrous significance. The buildings would be dedicated to one deity or another. The entire city would be dedicated to Caesar, considered a deity in his own right. As one walked along the city streets there would be little alcoves carved into the stonework which lined the street. In each of these alcoves an idol would be placed for the worship of the people. Paul remarked upon these alcoves in Acts 17:23 when he told the men on Mars Hill that he considered them very religious, because as he passed along the street he encountered an altar to the unknown god in one of these alcoves. To be sure, this was said more than a little bit in jest.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

This kind of pervasive idolatrous emphasis would have been a source of great discomfort to these Jews if not a source of outright fear and outrage.

Add to this the fact that the city would have a gymnasium. This place was forbidden to the Jew. Most of the athletic contests here were performed in the nude, as were the Olympic races. It is not surprising that these gymnasiums became centers of homosexual activity for the community.

There was also the problem of associating with non-Jews, for most of the merchants would be Gentiles, and there would be no place to get kosher food. The food and merchandise available in the Decapolis would be made or grown by Gentiles, for the most part. Being there, touching anything in these areas or eating their food would render the disciples unclean for a length of time.

The problem of becoming unclean by touching a Gentile or something that he has touched is a problem for some Jewish shopkeepers even today. I have gone into a Jewish store and when I went to pay for my purchases, the owner would reach out for the money only to let it drop on the counter before picking it up. The money was then placed in a different cash drawer than the money from the Jewish customer who was waited on just ahead of me.

A similar custom prevailed in Jesus' time. The Samaritan shopkeepers would not accept coins from the hand of a Jew. The money was first dropped into a bucket of water to wash it and **then** they would touch it. This is just the reverse of the Jewish practice. It was done for precisely the same reason.

The disciples were accustomed to bringing their own food when going to "the other side." In Mark you will find these words,

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. Mark 8:14

Jewish and Gentile feelings of exclusiveness usually ran high. It was not uncommon, when a Jew did chance to walk through a Samaritan village, that someone would walk through town behind him and drop straw on his footprints. This straw would then be burned.

Apart from the fact that "the other side" held only distaste for the disciples, there was another problem, that of traveling on water. This was particularly true on the Sea of Galilee where a beautiful day on the Sea would turn into a violent storm in no time at all. These perilous weather changes only made them just that much more uncomfortable to go to "the other side."

The disciples would not go "to the other side" of their own choosing, I'm sure, and they must have wondered why Jesus would ever consider going there. But they went because He suggested it, and He was their Rabbi, their teacher, and they followed Him.

THE HEM OF HIS GARMENT

A woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because, she thought, 'If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.' Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. Mark 5:25-29

This is sometimes called the miracle on the way to a miracle. The story is found in each of the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew 9:20, Luke 8:43, and Mark 5:25. Notice what Mark says,

A woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. Mark 5:25

In Leviticus 15, there are instructions concerning a woman who has "a discharge of blood other than her period" or "beyond her period." In both of these instances, the instructions are the same.

She is unclean as long as the discharge continues. In the case of the woman in Mark 5, she had been unclean for 12 years. She had been barred from all forms of worship for 12 years.

Leviticus 15 also says that anything she touched would be unclean. This would mean that her husband had also been unclean for 12 years and barred from any experience of worship and even from the mandatory feasts. This was unthinkable for any Jew of that day. If this woman had a son under thirteen years of age, he would not have been able to prepare for his bar-mitzvah and could not have taken part if he had been prepared. He would have been as ostracized as his father.

This woman had been a social outcast for 12 years. She could not go to market to buy food because her money would make others unclean. She could not go to the well to get water and talk with the other women of the community because she would have made them unclean, a situation that would have been intolerable for their husbands. No one would have anything to do with her. No one would visit her home; she was welcomed in no home in the community. She was totally ostracized from everyone and everything in her community.

It was in these dire straights, whatever their specific nature, that this outcast woman decided to come to Jesus for help. Notice that she came up behind Him. This is not the height of confidence. She knew that on these narrow, busy streets, every person who bumped into her would become unclean. This would make them very angry. She knew that if she achieved her goal of touching Jesus' cloak or "the hem of his garment", Jesus would also be made unclean.

Did you ever wonder why she wanted to touch the hem of His garment? Or did you ever wonder what is the "hem of his garment"? In the time of Jesus, every Jewish man wore a garment which had no seam - it was woven in one piece throughout. This was called his tunic. In Deuteronomy, you will find these words,

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together. Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear. Deuteronomy 22:12

It was this fringe that this woman was determined to touch. This "tsitsit," as this undergarment is called, had great meaning in that society. Very strict Jewish men today will not discuss Torah with a man who does not wear the "tsitsit". The more important the man, the longer the fringe and the more flowing his robes. The fringe of the "tsitsit" was a man's symbol of authority and position in the community. By the early Middle Ages, Jewish men no longer wore the long flowing robes. They then designed a very short "tsitsit" which is still worn, and a talis, a shawl-like garment which is worn by the men at worship. Both are used, by very conservative Jews, to this day.

We must be clear. The fringe had no mystical, magical power of its own. It was the symbol of the man's power in the community. There is record, however, of another situation recorded in Mark, where the people touched the hem, the fringe of Jesus' garment, and they were healed. This is also found in Matthew 14:36. When Jesus was in Gennesaret, the people brought out the sick and all who touched the hem or fringe of His garment were healed.

Notice what Mark tells us about this woman's medical care,

She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. Mark 5:26

For centuries it was thought that diseases were in the blood. In order to get rid of the disease, they felt that they had to get rid of that blood. The practice of blood-letting was widely known in the time of Jesus. Incidentally, it continued until the 18th century. We know that George Washington received this treatment for some of his medical problems.

The woman's problem was that she had an issue of blood. The result of this condition would be that she was tired and weak all the time. When one doctor could not help her, she went to another doctor. This doctor would also believe that the disease was in the blood and cut her to release the disease. This would only make her weaker than she already was. Each doctor would in turn do the same procedure, collect his fee and leave her worse than she had been when she came to him.

The "hem" or "fringe" that this poor woman touched was the tassel which was added both to the bottom of his "tsitsit" or undergarment as well as the cloak or outer garment which Jewish men wore. It was the symbol of His power and position in the community. It was her way of saying that Jesus was a man of great power and she could benefit from that power if she could just touch the symbol of His power.

THE SECOND MILE

If someone wants you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Matthew 5:41

Matthew is the only Gospel writer to include these unusual instructions of Jesus to His followers.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described what the kingdom of God would be like. In this particular paragraph, He was describing how the child of God responds to the very human notions of retaliation and revenge. In that part of the world, the understanding was "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." It was revenge in kind.

In Matthew, chapter five, Jesus is showing how He came to fulfill the Law. Notice that each paragraph begins, "You have heard that...but I say unto you." In Matthew 5:39-41, Jesus is giving the Christian alternative to the law of revenge, the "eye for an eye" rule. If they strike you, then turn the other cheek. If they sue you, then give them your cloak. This was an important inclusion because the law forbade taking both the tunic and the cloak. It would render the borrower defenseless against the intense cold they experienced at night. Jesus gave still another illustration, saying that if they demand that you go one mile, volunteer to go two.

When a Roman army conquered a nation, they used as much indigenous labor as they could. This was an economic necessity because of the extremely high cost of maintaining an army of occupation so far from the land of origin. In order to make this as fair as possible, the Roman authorities passed a law which permitted a Roman soldier to compel any man of a conquered people to carry his armor for the distance of one mile. At that point the conquered man was free to lay it down and go on his way. You may remember the story of Jesus' crucifixion. In Matthew 27:32, the writer tells how the Roman soldier coerced Simon of Cyrene into carrying the cross of Jesus because the Master was unable to carry it any longer.

Jewish men were incensed by this Roman law. They thought of it as degrading and as an affront to God because the Roman emperor was considered as a deity and to serve his people was understood to be a service to an idol - a blasphemy among the Jewish people. The Jews did everything possible to avoid such service. When outright refusal to obey this law was their only escape, these men were often punished and in some instances killed.

As Jesus teaches, it is clear that He is talking about a response to one's enemies. He taught that they should love their enemies. If someone were to take their tunic, they were to offer their cloak also. If someone were to strike them on one cheek, they were to offer the other also.

In this instance, Jesus had a specific suggestion about how to love an enemy. When they force you to carry their armor for one mile because **the law requires** you to do it, volunteer to carry their armor a second mile because **your love for them demands it**.

This change is part of Jesus' response to the law of revenge. He was simply saying that revenge would not work, and that if you want to bring about change, return kindness and assistance for abuse. Each of the three illustrations Jesus suggested carries this same message.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

The idea of doing good for people who take advantage of you would have been a mockery to the Romans, and it would be no less ridiculous to the Jews. Nevertheless, it is what Jesus taught and lived day by day.

I can imagine that the multitudes who heard Him gasped at His words. It might not have been what patriotic Jews wanted to hear, but Jesus was clearly announcing the way a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven would treat an enemy.

DO YOU LOVE ME?

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord' he said, 'You know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' John 21:15

Most of us are very impressed with the tension Peter experienced when Jesus asked him three times if he loved Him. I don't know about you, but if someone asked the same precise question of me two times in a row, I would wonder what was happening. I would begin to question in my mind if they thought I had not told the truth the first time. But if they asked me the same personal, penetrating question three times in a row, I am certain that my tension level would be extremely high.

Most of the time, however, people do not look carefully at the question Jesus asked of Peter. Jesus said to him, "Do you love me more than **these**?" Just what did He mean by the word "these"? There is no way to be certain. The context of this experience is a fishing situation. Jesus may have asked Peter if he loved Jesus more than the vocation to which he had given the earlier part of his life. On the other hand, the two of them were close by the rest of the disciples. In view of the fact that Peter had promised that he would never deny Jesus and then did so anyway, it is just as possible that Jesus meant the other disciples when He used the word "these".

Jesus asked Peter the question three times. Why three times? We are all familiar with the fact that Peter denied Jesus three times. It could be that it was a way to identify the source of Jesus' questions about just how committed Peter was to his Lord. If you deny me three times, perhaps I need to emphasize the question of faithfulness three times. Another reason may have to do with the Jewish Law, noted in Deuteronomy 17:6, that truth was confirmed not by the word of one witness, but by the word of two or three witnesses. It is just possible that Jesus was establishing the witness of Peter concerning his relationship to Jesus by asking the same questions three times.

There is still another possibility. If you look at the question in your English Bible, it appears that the question was exactly the same three times in a row. The truth is that it was the same only twice. This does not mean that the translators did a poor job. It is, rather, that our language does not have the depth of expression which is present in the Greek.

When Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Jesus used the word "agapae." This word describes a selfless form of love that is not caused by an act of kindness on the part of someone else, nor is it extinguished by someone's error. It comes from within. It is to love totally without any thought of response. It is a love that has no boundaries. John expresses something of the greatness and limitlessness of this form of love when he said, "God is love." I John 4:8. "Agapae" love is an expression of the character of God, reflected in human relationships.

Peter's response seems direct enough.

Yes, Lord, You know that I love you. John 21:15b

This answer, in the Greek text, however, is substantially different in its meaning. Peter used the word "phileo." This word has more to do with tender affections. The Greeks understood it well when they compounded the word with another, "adelphos," which means

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

"brother." From this combined word we get our phrase "brotherly love." It is a tender affection, a very human emotion, but it has definite limits. In fact, on one occasion Jesus said,

The man who loves (phileo) his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. John 12:25

It was His way of saying that this was a form of love which was unworthy in terms of eternal values. It might be accurate to say that Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, you know that I **like** you." Peter was trying to give a positive answer without telling a falsehood. He did not really answer the question which Jesus asked. By his answer, Peter really changed Jesus' question. Jesus asked, "Do you love me without reservation?" Instead of speaking about unconditional love, Peter spoke of brotherly love which is intense, but has definite limits. Peter had to change the word because he did not love Jesus unconditionally, but he did have great affection for Jesus.

Notice Jesus' response:

Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' John. 21:15c

Whatever the level of our love and commitment to Jesus Christ, there is a correspondent responsibility that goes with it. ¹ Lambs are the most vulnerable part of the flock. Jesus was saying that even if we just love Him in the way that Peter did (phileo), we must give ourselves to care for the vulnerable of His people.

Feeding literally means herding, one who pastures or provides fodder for sheep. It is the important task of initiating and maintaining the health and growth of the flock.

Again, Jesus confronted Peter:

'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.' John 21:16

Jesus gave Peter a second opportunity to deal with his relationship with Him. He used the same word, "agapae," to ask Peter if he loved Him without reservation; to inquire if he refused to place limits upon his love for Jesus.

Peter was again on the spot. He answered in the same manner as before. He said, in effect, "Yes, Lord, you know that I **like** (phileo) you." The text gives no indication, but the tensions in this conversation must have been much higher by this time.

Jesus could not have been thrilled with the response, but still reached out to His beloved friend, saying to Peter, "take care of my sheep." John 21:16b. In this second charge, Jesus addresses Peter's attention to the sheep. These are more mature than the lambs. Nevertheless, all of the flock need the gentle care. "Take care" (poimaino) comes from the word "shepherd" (poimen). The idea of shepherding, as opposed to feeding, includes the whole range of responsibilities for the care of sheep: discipline, authority, protection, res-

¹ John R. Kohlenberger III, Ed., *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984) p. 418

DO YOU LOVE ME?

toration, as well as feeding.² Jesus challenges Peter to express the depth of his affection by the investment of himself in the care and nourishment of the children of God, whatever the stage of maturity.

A third time Jesus confronts Peter concerning the exact depth of his commitment:

The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.'
John 21:17

In this third confrontation, Jesus asked a different question. Jesus said, "Do you love (phileo) me?" Jesus completely changed His question. He had been asking whether Peter loved Him with a limitless, God-like love. Failing to receive a positive reply on two occasions, Jesus came down to the level where Peter lived and asked Peter's question, "Peter, do you **like** (phileo) me?" It is a brotherly kind of limited love. Do you love me with the very human, limited, responding kind of love? Jesus was so patient. He was willing to accept Peter's affection at whatever level it could be shared.

But Peter was hurt (lupeo). This Greek word literally means to be deeply grieved; to experience intense pain and sorrow. There is an interesting question here. Was Peter hurt because Jesus asked the question three times or was he hurt because on the third question Jesus came down to the word "phileo" as Peter had, thus exposing the low level of his love for Jesus? We must exercise great generosity here, because the text is not conclusive. My own inclination is to understand the statement to mean that Peter experienced great pain because Jesus finally came down from the use of the word "agapae" to the word "phileo" in order to force both the question and the answer to deal with the same issue. In this dramatic exchange, I am struck deeply by the awesome expression of the patience and grace of Jesus, demonstrated toward Peter.

Jesus' response to Peter's painful confession is as dramatic as it is loving, Jesus said:

Feed my sheep. John 21:17c

The word "feed" (boskai) is exactly the same word Jesus used when He said "feed my lambs." Again, the word "sheep" is exactly the same word Jesus used when he said, "shepherd my sheep." No matter the level of maturity, God's people still need to be nurtured; they need total care.

I identify with this experience because it is my story told in Peter's life. I expect that it is your story as well. It is extremely important for us to come to grips with exactly how much we really love Jesus. By the same token, it is just as important for us to understand that no matter to what level we have come in our commitment and devotion, Jesus accepts us there and challenges us to reflect His love to others as our commitment frees us to be His servants.

² Ibid.

LIGHT UNDER A BUSHEL

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. Matthew 5:14, 15

This parable is recorded in each of the Synoptic Gospels -- Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is not recorded in John.

Every person who listened, as Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount, understood exactly what Jesus said. Unfortunately, Jesus used illustrations which are not native to our culture and so we tend to assume that we understand the parable He taught, but we often do not really understand.

Jesus was teaching Scriptural truths by means of a parable. It is a teaching tool which is still the basic method used by many rabbis of the Conservative or Hassidic groups which represent an even stricter orientation today.

The basic truth Jesus was teaching was simple, yet profound. He said,

You are the light of the world. Matthew 5:14a

Each statement in the above parable is included specifically to add one or more facets of understanding to this basic truth. Jesus proceeds to give a series of illustrations whose purpose is twofold:

1. Jesus used three illustrations. He did not specifically say so, but it was the custom to use two or three pieces of evidence to prove a point. On one occasion, Jesus was teaching and said:

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' Matthew 18:16

Jesus did not say this because He just thought it would be a good idea. He knew, as His Jewish hearers knew, that the Old Testament clearly speaks to the issue in these words:

One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of a crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Deuteronomy 19:15

2. Each illustration adds specific information which was vital to what Jesus was teaching. In Matthew's account, Jesus said that He was using a ridiculous illustration. People would not place a lamp under a bowl in order to get light.

The first illustration is a simple statement of fact that anyone would know and understand. The main source of light in their homes was an oil lamp. They did not have matches, so they needed a way to preserve their flame. When the lamp was being used to provide light it was placed on a lamp stand or a shelf high on the wall. When they just wanted to preserve the flame, it was placed in a large inverted clay pot. This vessel had two

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

small holes to allow air to enter and exit the container. This would give off almost no light, but it preserved the flame while using a minimum of oil.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching about the nature of the Kingdom of God. He said that one characteristic of the people in that Kingdom was that they were the light of the world. Just as a person would not try to get light into their house by placing the lamp in a clay pot designed to preserve the flame, but give no light, so the member of the Kingdom of God would be preoccupied with giving away that light rather than focusing all their energies on preserving the flame.

The second illustration Jesus used is quite interesting. In Mark's account, Jesus said:

Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? Mark 4:21

The word translated "bed" is "klinan." This word is used to describe both the regular sleeping mat, which most people used, as well as the bed, which only the rich and elite could afford. In this instance, it appears that Mark is referring to a bed of our understanding, because it is impossible to place a lamp beneath a bed roll and not have it catch fire.

This is especially intriguing because Jesus was talking to a large group of people who did not have a bed and had probably never slept in one.

The homes in much of the Near East, even today, do not have beds. In several Arab countries, you will find a beautiful home with every modern convenience. Right beside it, or in the front yard, will be a Bedouin tent. You can be sure that at least the elder parents of these families sleep in the tent, by choice, because the sleeping mat is more comfortable for them than the modern bed.

Although the people to whom Jesus was preaching had never slept in a bed, they knew about them. There were beds in Egypt at least 2000 years before Christ. A bed for these people would be like a Rolls Royce for us. I have seen a large number of Rolls Royce automobiles. I have not, however, ridden in one much less owned one. This does not prevent me from knowing about them.

If you put a lamp under a bed, the only benefit that could be realized from it would be that it would provide a little warmth for those in the bed. That however, is not the purpose of the lamp. Jesus talked about this as something no one would do. The people who heard Him may even have laughed when Jesus said it. Remember, Jesus was talking about the nature of the Kingdom of God. The purpose of the Kingdom of God was not to make the citizens more comfortable. Their purpose was to share the wonderful gift they had all received. The purpose of light is to shine on everyone. The purpose of the Kingdom of God is to share the blessings of its citizenship with all who will receive it.

In Matthew's account, Jesus also talks about a city set on a hill:

You are the light of the world. 'A city on a hill cannot be hidden.' Matthew 5:15

You may remember that the Sermon on the Mount took place on a hillside south of Capernaum along the Sea of Galilee. From the very spot where they were sitting, they could see a large city on top of a hill on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. They all knew that at night you could see this city very clearly from miles away. They also knew that

LIGHT UNDER A BUSHEL

they could look to the northwest, from their homes in Capernaum, and see the city of Nazareth sitting on a hill several miles away.

Again, Jesus is dealing with the purpose of light. Lamps were not intended to just bring comfort for a person, but to bring light to all in the house. In the same way, the members of the Kingdom of God were light, intended to be shared with every person who wanted to know about Jesus.

As previously indicated, there are three very well-known illustrations in this parable which support one basic truth -- the citizens of the Kingdom of God are the Light of the World. In supporting this truth, these illustrations add three distinct messages:

1. The light under a bushel - Light is not to be kept for yourself, but shared with others.
2. The light under a bed - Light is not to be kept for one's own comfort, but to be given away to help others.
3. City on a hill - As you bring light into your life, it will also be a light to others or it is wasted.

Jesus confirmed and repeated the Old Testament teaching that the Jews were the Light of the World in order to share the knowledge of God with the Gentiles, not to lord it over them. This was an important message in the time of Christ, because there were strong religious Jews who held this view and lorded it over the Gentiles and others who did not agree with them. The story of the Pharisee and the Publican is a case in point.

We should keep in mind that this parable is a part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Immediately following this parable there is a description of the ways in which Jesus came to fulfill the Law. This is part and parcel of what Jesus meant when he said that the citizens of the Kingdom of God are the Light of the World.

The message that Jesus taught is as appropriate today as it has ever been. Our standing in Christ can never appropriately be a source of pride or superiority. Light is given to the citizens of the Kingdom in order to share it with others. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Matthew 5:14

The fact that we are citizens of the Kingdom is a source of gratitude, not pride. We are called to be reflectors of that light. Were it not for the grace and mercy of God we would be the ones in need of the light, not the bearers of it. This great truth is graphically pressed home to us, as it was to the Pharisees, by the parable of the lamp in each of the three illustrations.

THE INN

And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

We tend to think of "the inn" as a first-century motel. The word used to describe such a place does not appear in Luke 2:7. The word translated "inn" is "kataluma," which means a guest chamber. It is a room on the roof of a Jewish, flat-roofed, private home, where guests were housed and where the family often slept in times of unusually high temperatures.

There are a number of passages, in both the Old and New Testaments, that give insights into what an "inn" was and what it was not.

The Gospel of Luke is very helpful in describing the use of this word:

All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest (kataluma) of a sinner.' Luke 19:7

The people of Jericho began to murmur because Jesus had accepted the hospitality of a tax collector named Zacchaeus. In this instance, the word "guest," "katalusai," suggests one who has accepted the hospitality of another. This has caused some scholars to wonder if Jesus had agreed to be the overnight guest of Zacchaeus and used the "kataluma," the cool upper room, to stay for the night as well as be his guest for dinner.

Luke gives further reference to this word:

And say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks: where is the guest room (katalusai) where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' Luke 22:11

Notice that the word "katalusai" is used to identify both a "guest" and a "guest room." This very familiar text identifies the fact that the upper room, where Jesus and His disciples observed the Passover, was exactly the same kind of place where Luke tells us there was no room for Mary and Joseph among the relatives of Joseph.

There is another kind of facility which may well have been used at the time of Jesus' birth. It was a "pandocheion" in Greek or "caravanserai" in Eastern languages. "Pandocheion" is a compound word: Pan, meaning "all," and "docheion" meaning to receive; to receive all. It was a place to receive strangers; a place where caravans might stop; a place where beasts of burden could be unloaded and sheltered. ¹ This word was used in Luke 10:34, where the Good Samaritan took the injured traveler to an "inn".

Our text does not tell us where Jesus was born. Luke 2:12 indicates that after his birth, Jesus was placed in a manger. This would fit the picture of the conditions of Jesus' birth previously described.

The Old Testament description gives a similar impression of what we call an "inn." Our translations of Joshua 2:1 and 6:22 speak of Rahab as a "prostitute." However, the

¹John R. Kohlenberger III, Ed., *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984) p. 591

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Targum, an Aramaic translation of the Old Testament, speaks of her as an "innkeeper." The Mishnah, the philosophical law code written around 200 A.D. and upon which the Talmud was based, places an innkeeper as the lowest on the scale of degradation, even lower than a shepherd. This provides us with some idea of the reputation that an "inn" had at that time. At least in part, it was because of this evil reputation that Jews and even early Christians stressed the need to show hospitality to strangers - Hebrews 13:2.

Look at Joseph's life. The fact that he was a carpenter and stone cutter suggests that he probably came from a poor family. The carpentry trade was not lucrative. Joseph was probably as poor as the rest of his family. He could not have afforded to stay at an inn if he had wanted to do so.

Look also at the facts we have of Joseph's family. The text states that Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone should go to his own "town" or city. This meant that every relative of Joseph's from all over Palestine had to come to Bethlehem to be registered in this tax census. Nearly everyone who lived in Bethlehem would be part of the family and clan of Joseph. Family members would be insulted if a relative would come to town and stay at an "inn," a place of ill-repute, rather than use their upper room. It would be like going to visit one's parents and refusing their guest room in favor of a motel.

On the other hand, the fact that Mary was ready to give birth to her child and that her marriage with Joseph had not been legally consummated, might have incensed his family. In such a situation, they could easily have refused the hospitality of the family. We will never know for certain what the reason for their refusal was.

It appears that although the city was bulging with returning members of Joseph's family, there might have been a place available for them to stay. However, we must remember that Mary was due to give birth to her baby. Even though there might have been enough room for sleeping, there probably was not enough room or privacy for her to give birth to her baby.

If you think about it, you realize even in His birth Jesus found a place among the outcasts and sinners of His society. Being the house guest of Zacchaeus and Levi was not so different from what Jesus experienced at His birth.

THIS CUP

Going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.' Mark 14:35, 36

The story of Jesus' agonizing prayer in Gethsemane is so well known that we do not stop to ask questions about it. Questions like: Did Jesus have a cup in His hand when He prayed? If so, what kind of vessel was it? What did Jesus mean by this request? Sermons and studies, in our time, assume that we understand what He meant. That assumption may or may not be true.

We have no reason to believe that Jesus brought a cup or chalice with Him to Gethsemane. It seems clear that He was using symbolic language; a word picture which made His feelings quite vivid.

In the Kidron Valley, on the southeast side of Jerusalem, in the vicinity of the Garden of Gethsemane, is a church called the "Dominus Flevit Church." Translated into English, "Dominus Flevit" simply means "the Lord or ruler wept." This church is architecturally exciting.

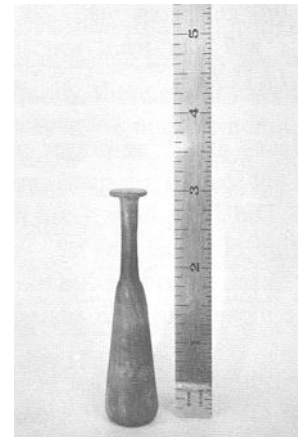


In this picture you can see that the roof of the church is shaped like a teardrop. Notice also, on top of each of the four corners of the church is a gracefully designed vessel. This is an enlarged tearcup.

The picture which follows gives you a close-up view of such a tear cup.

Notice that the cup is three inches tall. A whole array of these tear cups can be seen in Jerusalem museums. Jewish people

usually thought of their tears as having personality and character. They had a cup of tears for joy and one for tears of sorrow. They preserved these tears and in so doing preserved the memory of the joyful and sorrowful experiences the tears represented. You may remember an experience of Jesus in Luke 7:44. Jesus had been invited to the home of a Pharisee for dinner. The Pharisee did not even extend the minimal gesture of hospitality to Jesus, that of washing His feet. "A woman who had lived a sinful life" came and stood behind Jesus and wept. When Jesus was chided by the Pharisee because He allowed this sinful woman to touch Him, Jesus responded.



Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Luke 7:44

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

The context makes it clear that this sinful woman was behind Jesus as He reclined at the table. Her tears may have been dropping on Jesus' feet. It is also highly possible that she poured the contents of her cup of sorrow on His feet. This would fit the Jewish understanding very well.

The Greek word translated "cup" is "potaerion", and usually identifies a drinking vessel. It is the only word used for "cup" in the New Testament. In six places, however, it is used in a symbolic sense:

*"Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the **cup** the Father has given me?"
John. 18:11*

In this instance, the word is used to describe the sorrowful task God the Father had given Jesus to perform. It is a direct reference to what Jesus was praying about in Luke 22.

*Father if you are willing, take this **cup** from me; yet not my will, but yours be done. Luke 22:42*

Paul also used the word in a symbolic sense:

*You can not drink the **cup** of the Lord and the **cup** of demons too; You can not have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. I Corinthians 10:21*

In this verse, Paul uses the word to describe the area of one's commitment. Paul states the principle in two ways, using two different pictures.

*You can not drink the **cup** of the Lord and the **cup** of demons too;...*

To drink from another's cup was to celebrate oneness, affirmation and harmony with that person. This was part of the Pharisee's distress that Jesus would eat with the likes of Zacchaeus and Levi. This was a symbolic use of the word "cup."

You can not have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

The second statement of the principle presents a slightly different focus. Paul uses "the Lord's table" to identify the New Covenant, to what we refer. as communion. Paul is saying that one can not enter into the New Covenant with Jesus Christ and at the same time make a commitment to demons.

As you look at the Scriptural use of the word "cup," you get an idea of how the Jewish people thought about it. In Psalm 23, David described the bounty which God provided for him when he said,

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my **cup** overflows. Psalm 23:5*

THIS CUP

Life that is blessed and abundant was spoken of as a cup that overflows. A "cup" is a way of describing the conditions of life. An overflowing cup is one that is bountiful.

On the other hand, there is another kind of cup. In the Old Testament, Isaiah speaks of this cup:

*Arise, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the **cup** of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger. Isaiah 51:17*

It is another word picture. God pours out His wrath as a person would pour water from a goblet. Whenever there is judgment, the Jews described this as "the cup of God's wrath."

The apostle John used the same image in the book of the Revelation:

*He, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the **cup** of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. Revelation 14:10*

Jesus calls the experience of judgment "the cup of his wrath." It, again, is a picturesque way of describing experiences of joy and bitterness, like the experience of drinking the full contents of a cup.

In Psalm 116, David is drawing a picture of what happens when the salvation of God is vividly experienced in the lives of His people. David said,

*How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the **cup** of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. Psalm 116:12, 13*

Telling of how God delivered Israel and himself out of affliction and saved them from sorrow and the grave, David goes on to speak of their experiences as "**the cup of salvation.**"

The mother of James and John asked Jesus for the privilege of having her two sons sit at Jesus' left and right hand in His kingdom. Jesus tried to explain to her that this was not just a matter of privilege, but involved the endurance of great hardship. He referred to the dire experiences that lay ahead of Him by asking her:

'You don't know what you are asking,' Jesus said to them, 'Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?' Matthew 20:22

Jesus was saying that they would have to endure the kinds of abuse, physical pain, misunderstanding, false accusation and rejection that He experienced.

Again the Apostle Paul spoke of the Lord's Supper in these terms:

*Is not the **cup** of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? I Corinthians 10:16*

Paul spoke of receiving and drinking the cup in the Lord's Supper as the "cup of thanksgiving." It is a reference to their Passover celebration. It is also a picture of a great bless-

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

ing portrayed as a cup of blessing which one receives as one would receive a cup of cold water.

Jesus prayed in Mark 14 concerning the bitter experience of dying on the cross. He described this, in good Jewish terms, as a cup of sorrow which He must drain to the bottom. Mark gives us, here, a glimpse of the very human nature of Jesus. He was as apprehensive about physical pain as anyone else would be. Jesus was reluctant to face rejection and mockery as any other human being. In His prayer, Jesus dealt honestly with the Father. At the same time, Jesus was just as anxious to escape the ultimate pain of crucifixion. Out of the depths of His humanity Jesus cried, "Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

When Jesus left His disciples and went a little distance and fell upon His knees, He prayed,

*Father, if you are willing, take this **cup** from me... Luke 22:42a*

It is certain Jesus did not have a drinking vessel in His hand. It is reasonable to believe that Jesus was praying about the repulsive experience of shouldering the sin of all humanity in becoming the sacrificial lamb on the cross. It was a very human way of talking about the experience of tragedy that was to take place in a very short time.

Most of us have read this passage with a degree of understanding for many years. The discovery of the "tear cup" does not contradict that understanding. It gives us a deeper grasp of the emotional chaos through which Jesus was going as He prayed. Formerly, Jesus' prayer gave us a glimpse of His humanity. The awareness of the "tear cup" gives us a glance inside that humanity, enabling us to see something of just how human, how frail He was as He struggled with the ideas of dying and the horrendous separation from the Father that would come during that ordeal. This glimpse into the thinking of Jesus gives us one more trace of understanding of just how painful and loathsome it was for Jesus to take upon His sinlessness the enormity of our sin.

HE TOOK BREAD

*And he took bread, gave thanks and brake it, and gave it to them, saying,
"This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."
Luke 22:19*

Did you ever wonder why Jesus chose bread for what we call "the Lord's supper" or "communion"? Every kind of food on the Passover table had symbolic significance, but Jesus chose bread and wine. This suggests that Jesus had something very specific in mind when He made this choice.

Some have suggested that there was no special significance at all in the choices Jesus made. They take this one step farther and update it to our culture and times. The result is that they then feel free to be more "creative" in the ways in which they serve communion. In these services, often with youth groups, there is no telling what symbols they will use in this celebration.

I believe it was a symbolic choice that Jesus made and His disciples understood exactly what Jesus was trying to say. I believe it makes every difference in the world whether we use bread and wine or "coke" and potato chips.

Jesus could have chosen from a whole array of food that they commonly ate at Passover, but He didn't. He could have chosen the meat or the shank bone from the Passover meal to symbolize the mercy of God when the angel passed over the Hebrew homes that had sprinkled blood on their door-posts.

He could have chosen the charoseth. This is a mixture about the consistency of mortar which it symbolized. It would have reminded them of the mercy of God who delivered them from making the clay bricks for Pharaoh by bringing them out of Egypt altogether.

He could have chosen the bitter herbs. This was a part of the Passover meal to remind them of just how bitter life was for their ancestors in Egypt.

Jesus could have chosen the salt water. It was a symbol of the power and mercy of God who brought Israel through the Red Sea, a body of salt water.

Jesus could also have chosen the hard boiled egg. It was a reminder to the people of Israel, at each Passover, of just how hard the heart of Pharaoh became when the confrontation with Jehovah took place concerning the plagues.

There were also green vegetables, or parsley, that Jesus could have chosen to remind them of the grace of God that had promised to make of them a new nation.

Jesus could have chosen any of these symbolic foods from the Passover meal, but He did not. Jesus had something else in mind when He chose bread.

Bread was also a part of the Passover meal. On that occasion, the unleavened bread was a symbol of the haste with which their fathers had left Egypt. They left so quickly that they could not take time for their bread to rise.

Bread suggested several different symbols to the Jewish mind. It was the symbol of abundance that the Jewish family remembered each Sabbath as they ate bread and drank wine, giving thanks for the bounty with which God had blessed their home.

Bread reminded them of the victor's meal which Melchizedek served to Abraham as he returned from releasing his nephew, Lot, and brought back all the goods that the Eastern alliance of kings had taken from Sodom and Gomorrah - Genesis 14:18.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Jewish people used a great deal of symbolism in every part of their lives. There is one more symbol attached to bread which appears to be most significant in what Jesus was trying to convey as He chose to use bread in this memorial. Jewish people had three or four ways to symbolize forgiveness.

1. The "kiss of forgiveness". This was mentioned in the discussion of the Prodigal Son.

2. The sharing of salt. Salt was one of their most valuable possessions. It was also thought of as a purifying agent.

3. A Jewish person should take the person who needs to be forgiven into his house and invite him to receive his hospitality.

4. Eat a meal with the person who needs to be forgiven. It is important to remember, at this point, that for these people to eat a meal and "to break bread" were one and the same thing. This was because they did not have knives and forks as we do. They broke off a piece of bread and this became their eating utensil. Bread was their basic symbol of forgiveness. It was this very idea that caused Joseph to identify himself to his brothers and then sit down with them in private to eat a meal. Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers was sealed by eating a meal; by breaking bread together. You will remember that he also put his arms around them and kissed them. These are additional expressions of forgiveness and trust.

When Jesus took the loaf and broke bread and gave it to the disciples, He was both offering them total forgiveness and sealing a covenant, which He was about to make with them.

The disciples did not know, at this point, just how much they were going to need the forgiveness of Jesus. Remember that after the resurrection, Jesus ate with His disciples time after time. They needed to know that they were forgiven even though they had all denied Jesus.

Eating with the guilty person is the strongest expression of forgiveness a Jew could receive. It was an acknowledgement of his guilt and an affirmation of his release from that guilt. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that they had failed, but He was more intent that they know that He had forgiven them. He made this clear by offering them bread.

When Jesus met Zacchaeus, He said,

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately, I must stay at your house today." Luke 19:5

It was not that Jesus had nowhere else to stay. Jesus wanted him to know with certainty that he was forgiven. To eat with him was a symbol of that reality.

When Jacob took his family and left town, Laban chased him for three days. After scolding Jacob for leaving the way he did, Laban said,

"Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us"...So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Genesis 31:44, 47

Eating with a person was both a sign of forgiveness and the seal of a covenant. This is precisely what Jesus was talking to them about all during supper.

HE TOOK BREAD

It appears that Jesus chose the bread of the Passover to be part of his celebration with the disciples, so that they could be absolutely certain of their forgiveness.

THE WINE

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.' Luke 22:20

Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose to take wine for this remembrance rather than something else? Would it have made a difference if Jesus had given them the salt water rather than the wine? Is there something special about Jesus' choosing the wine? Did the use of wine convey any unique meaning?

Some people believe that there was no special significance at all to Jesus' choice. They believe that Jesus used wine because it was there, because it was what people of that culture drank. They also take this idea one step further and update it to what we drink in our culture. The result is either a soft drink and potato chips, tea and cookies or coffee and donuts instead of bread and wine.

The cup of wine was very symbolic to the Hebrew people. Every week, as part of their Sabbath observance, the father of the house pours wine into a chalice until it is completely filled and running over. The symbol of this is at least threefold:

1. It was a symbol of the overflowing providence of God which had been an important part of their lives every day of that week.
2. It was a rare occurrence when a slave was set free. When it came time for his freedom, he was given a bowl of wine. It was the symbol of his freedom from slavery.
3. It was an affirmation that this bounty was not the product of the worker or farmer, but of God who had caused the grapes to grow and the grain to produce.

Every year, the Jews each drank four glasses of wine during the Passover meal. These were symbols of joy, a celebration of thanksgiving for God's lavish providence which often occurred in the midst of devastation.

It had always seemed to me that Jesus had just paused in the Passover festivities in order to talk with His disciples about His impending death. It was, however, much more than that.

Any person who does not come from a highly ritualistic background might have difficulty in understanding that it was unthinkable for anyone to change the wording of the Passover observance. That was simply **never** done. However, that was precisely what Jesus did and it appears certain that the disciples were shocked by this change.

Jesus gave us some important information about this special celebration of the Passover:

In the same way after supper he took the cup saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.' Luke 22:20

Whatever else it means, this is a covenant. A covenant is a formal, binding agreement made between two or more people. When they entered into a covenant, they used two symbols to seal it. First, they drank the wine. Secondly, they ate together.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Each person in turn would drink from the cup until all the contents were consumed. By this action, they were accepting each other as brothers. Thus they were bound to defend and be faithful to each other in covenant even to the point of death.

Jesus must have shocked His disciples by identifying this as a covenant in **His** blood. By identifying the cup of wine as His blood, Jesus placed the full risk upon Himself while opening up the benefits of the covenant to those who loved Him. The mention of blood indicated what each participant was prepared to invest in this agreement. Jesus made it clear that He was paying the full price, though the others were considered full participants.

The way Jesus introduced this celebration tells us a great deal about it. It was a covenant, a formal agreement visually accepted by all the participants, and it was binding upon all who participated. Because it was sealed in blood, it involved several understandings: This covenant could never be set aside. The participants must keep the covenant even if its performance brought death. It could not be changed nor could it be violated. The participants received the same faithful concern that any blood relative would receive, and finally, it could be counted on for the duration of the covenant.

Jesus entered into this covenant on their behalf. Every one of the disciples knew that people entered into covenants for mutual benefit and little else. Jesus identified this covenant in such a way that the benefits were clearly one-sided, for the good of the disciples and all mankind.

This is one case where Jesus' choice of wine was ultimately significant in terms of understanding all that Jesus was saying to His disciples in this observance.

In Paul's discussion concerning the "Lord's Supper," in I Corinthians 11:17-33, he speaks of several concerns. One of these concerns is:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. I Corinthians 11:27-30

Is it possible that Paul spoke in these forceful terms because he understood the implications of the covenant, of which Jesus spoke, so very well? What does that say to us?

WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED

Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Matthew 18:19, 20

In the Jewish community, "minyan" is very important. The word "minyan," as found in Ezra 6:17, literally means "number." It is used today, as it was in Jesus' time, to identify the number of Jewish men necessary to conduct a service of worship. Some Jewish scholars hold that "minyan" dates back at least to the time of Ruth and Boaz. The Old Testament book of Ruth contains information about their wedding. In that account the author wrote:

Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, 'Sit here' and they did so. Ruth 4:2

Roughly speaking, "minyan" describes the makeup of a "congregation." It represents the ingredients, what it takes to make up a congregation, the changing of a private meeting into a public one.

The Jewish community usually understands "minyan" to mean ten Jewish men. I have attended a Torah service where at the stated time of beginning only eight Jewish men and two Gentiles were present. We stood and talked for half an hour. Phone calls were made, and when the remaining two Jewish men arrived, the service began.

There was value in the minyan rule. In small Jewish communities, two men who otherwise might avoid each other would be forced to be together to share the blessings of worship and perhaps iron out their differences.

The number which constitutes "minyan" has not always remained the same. The generally accepted "minyan" is ten Jewish men, but local custom has dictated as few as six. ¹ In the Jerusalem Talmud, "minyan" is defined as nine Jewish men and a Torah scroll present. ² The Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, dictates that nine Jewish men and the Ark join together to form "minyan." ³ Still other combinations are suggested for different situations.

The illustrious twelfth-century French authority Rabbenyu Tam, grandson of Rashi, commented on the apparently popular practice of counting a minor as part of a 'minyan' if the boy held a chumash (Pentateuch) in his hand. ⁴

In a large city like Jerusalem, "minyan" would certainly be 10 Jewish men. In some of the very small villages and hamlets, like Nazareth, "minyan" might be as few as six.

Imagine the shock and surprise when Jesus said:

¹ Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book of Why*, (Middle Village: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 11379) p. 258

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. Matthew 18:19, 20

This quotation raises some questions. If God, in Jesus Christ, is omnipresent, then why does Jesus use the stipulation "where two or three are gathered together" when He is everywhere present all the time? God, in Jesus Christ, is omnipresent. Jesus was not speaking so much in terms of theology as He was of worship. He was not saying He would stay away until at least two have come together. He was saying, "My presence is not legalistically determined by number, but by relationships." We will say more about this later.

Jesus spoke quite specifically. Why did He choose the numbers two or three? Why didn't he choose one? Or four?

There is no fellowship involved with a single person. There is also no verification. It is not coincidental that Deuteronomy speaks in this manner:

On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness. Deuteronomy 17:6

This passage establishes two or three witnesses as verification for truth. Jesus was establishing "minyan" for those who were His disciples. Jesus was not finding fault with Jewish "minyan." He was defining a worship relationship with God for His followers. Two is enough to establish a level of fellowship among Christian people. It is few enough to foster the idea of personal worship.

Keep in mind that Jesus' announcement in Matthew 18:20 is part of the paragraph of Matthew 18:15-20. The subject of that paragraph describes how to deal with a Christian brother who sins. A situation of fellowship is established when you and the erring Christian brother come together. You need no one else. Jesus' changing of the rules concerning the number required to worship had to be a terrible shock to the disciples who listened to Him.

He changed the whole concept of "minyan." Up until this time, "minyan" consisted simply of counting the qualified Jewish men who were present. Jesus changed the provision from numbers to relationships.

"Minyan", for the Christian, was dependent upon the quality of two relationships. There needed to be enough Christians present to establish a relationship of praise and thanksgiving with God. One person can worship God, but when two or more are praising God and giving Him thanks, the "truth" of their worship is also established. There also needed to be enough Christians present to establish a relationship of fellowship and unity with one another. One person can praise God and have fellowship with Him, but that person can not have unity and fellowship with other Christians by himself. It takes at least two to meet this criteria.

Jesus has given the disciples, and those who challenged Him, a glimpse of just how great God's desire is to re-establish fellowship and a relationship of praise with those whom He has redeemed. It was God who initiated this change, not man. It was God, in Jesus Christ, who reached out to mankind to reopen the relationship.

WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED

Jesus was not talking about numbers, but relationships. When His people, whatever their numbers, gather to praise and give thanks to God and share unity and fellowship with each other, Jesus is present!

WASHING FEET

After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:5

Many people read John 13:1-10 and are puzzled. Still others, perhaps of a more distrusting nature, read the passage and wonder why Jesus was putting His disciples on the spot like this. Just what was He up to anyway? Is it possible that this is another ceremony that Jesus was instituting in the church? There are a number of people who believe that it was.

We need to remember that this was Passover, a very special and highly structured annual experience in every Jewish home.

Passover was a holy experience of joy and celebration in all Israel. It celebrated God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. It is against the background of this joyful, highly structured experience that this story is told. John is the only Gospel writer who records this emotionally charged experience.

It was the custom that the lowest servant in the household would remove the shoes and wash the feet of each guest who entered. If there were no servants in the household, then the host would see that these necessities were observed.

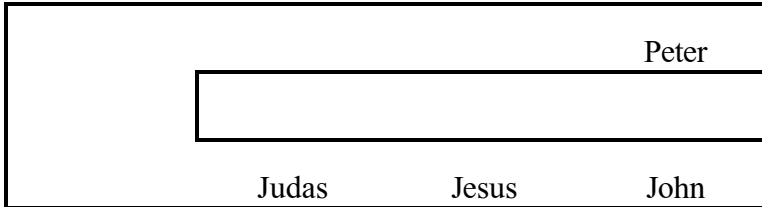
Shoes were sandals in that part of the world. There were few if any paved streets or roads outside walled cities. Roads were dusty and the sandy composition of the soil made dust an even greater problem. For two reasons it was necessary to wash a person's feet before eating:

1. The dirt and dust accumulated on the road.
2. The ceremonial need for cleansing before eating food.

Did you ever wonder who was supposed to wash the feet of the disciples? Should it have been Jesus? He was the host. Should it have been Philip? He was the youngest person present. Might it have been Peter and John? They made the provisions for this feast to be shared by the group. Whoever else it should have been, the response of Peter made it clear that no one thought that it should be Jesus.

Some have asked, why was it done after supper rather than before? We can not be certain. It could be that Jesus was giving the responsible person/s and all the rest of the disciples an opportunity to see the need and meet it. Think of what must have gone through their minds as one by one Jesus washed their feet. The Bible does not tell us the order of the disciples around the "triclinium" (or "U" shaped table," about 18 inches high, at which people lie down to eat, resting on their left elbow rather than sitting). The text does not say so, but it appears that Peter was located at the place opposite Jesus at the end of the table. The seating arrangement may have been something like this:

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!



If Peter reclined in this position, then he had been in the place of a servant. This was required so that the servant could replenish the bowls of food and care for the needs that might arise. This is the only time during the year when everyone, including the servants, must recline to eat. On other occasions, owners and/or the wealthy ate in a reclining position while servants and women stood.

Jesus wrapped a towel around His waist and washed the disciples' feet. He would have to begin with the two places of honor - Judas and John - and move toward the servant's position, where Peter was lying down. Peter had a lot of time to think about this before Jesus came to Him. Notice what John said,

"He came to Simon Peter..." John 13:6

It is a picture of Jesus washing eleven pair of dirty feet before he reached the place where Peter was reclining.

Did you ever wonder how a person got to be the disciple of a Rabbi? No Rabbi would ever ask anyone to be his disciple. That, however, is precisely what Jesus did!

There was a ceremony to indicate whether or not a person was accepted as a disciple. The ceremony would have been well known to everyone in Jerusalem. If a person wanted to be the disciple of a certain Rabbi, he would go to the Rabbi and request permission to wash the Rabbi's feet. If the Rabbi allowed his feet to be washed, it was a way of saying that the person's request to be a disciple had been granted. If, however, the Rabbi refused to have his feet washed, it was a way to inform the potential disciple that his request had been denied.

Jesus took the lowly position of washing the feet of each disciple. He used two symbols as He washed the disciples' feet. Jesus took the place of the lowliest slave in the household by washing their feet. This was a symbol of humility. Jesus also chose the symbol of a person who wanted to be the disciple of a Rabbi. It was like saying, if you will not be my disciples, then I will take the position of being your disciple. This would have been unheard of in Israel. It does not appear that Jesus was establishing another sacrament for the church. It does seem that Jesus was encouraging the disciples to really be His disciples and to be humble toward each other; to be sensitive to individual problems and meet these needs with grace.

Consider church situations about which you know. How many people, in these congregations, would seek out the place of the servant, the one who would wash the feet? How many lay persons work hard to get the opportunity to clean the church kitchen or some other unheralded task? How many ministers seek out struggling congregations rather than those that are booming?

BROKEN LEGS

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. John 19:31

This sounds like a grotesque request on the part of the Jews. Just imagine a living person having his legs intentionally broken. There was no anesthesia - no care provided. The legs were smashed or twisted until they broke while the person was hanging on the cross. The question that forces itself into our minds is, "Why would they do such a thing?"

The reason for the request to break the legs of the victims on the cross comes out of the Jewish religion and tradition. It was the time of the preparation for their Passover. As you may know, the preparations for Passover were extensive. They had to make sure that there was no leaven in their household. In order to accomplish this, they had to take a tour of the whole house to search for it. They could not have certain grains in their house, and they were to eat specific things for Passover. All of this was symbolic; all of it to impress upon the minds of the Jewish people the greatness of the gift of God when the angel of death passed over the homes of the Hebrew people where there was blood on the doorposts, while at the same time killing the first-born sons in Egyptian households where there was no lamb's blood on the doorposts.

For the Hebrew, to touch a dead body would make him unclean. To have a dead or dying body on the cross over Passover would be a source of uncleanness for their whole community. No one would be able to observe Passover unless the bodies were taken down from the crosses. This presented a problem. It was almost sundown and the bodies of Jesus and the two thieves were still hanging on crosses. In order to carry out the death sentence, the body could not be taken down from the cross unless the Roman officers had verified that the person was indeed dead. They had to hurry the dying along in order to be able to observe the Passover.

This was not a new request. It had happened before when the crucifixions interfered with the arrival of Sabbath, especially a festival such as Passover. The practical solution to the problem was to find a way to hasten death. The breaking of the victims' legs came in at this point to solve the problem.

Many people think that Jesus and the other two prisoners died from having the nails driven through their wrists and ankles. That would create excruciating pain, but it would not necessarily cause death. Death was not produced by the nails through the hands and feet. It was far more tragic than that. The Roman soldiers were masters of torture. The gruesome idea behind crucifixion was that by stretching out the arms and then allowing the whole weight of the body to be suspended from those arms made it difficult for the person to breathe. A degree of upward force could be exerted by the legs to keep the weight off the arms and enable the prisoner to continue breathing. The more tired the prisoner became, the more weight was applied to the arms and the less able the prisoner was to breathe. Eventually the prisoner would suffocate and die. This was an excruciating death. If the legs were broken, the prisoner would not be able to use his legs to support himself and thus suffocate more quickly.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

It was on this account that the Jews requested that the legs be broken and thus hasten the death of the prisoners. Some scholars have suggested that the Jewish leaders were in fact being merciful by hastening the death, but it might have been difficult to convince the prisoners of that idea.

The whole process gives an added dimension to our understanding of what Jesus endured on our behalf. Pondering these facts it is not at all difficult to understand what was going on in the mind of Jesus when He said,

Abba Father... everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will. Mark 14:36

THE CITY OF DAVID

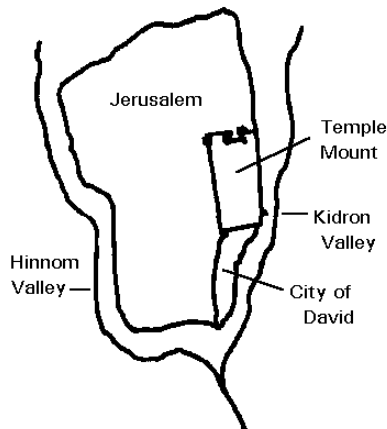
*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.
Luke 2:11*

Did you ever wonder if "the city of David" was a real place on the map? I had questions about whether or not it was so. I wondered just where it might be. One time I would think that it meant Jerusalem because David was king there and he loved the city. Another time I would read Luke two and assumed that it meant Bethlehem because it was the birthplace of David and the passage described the birthplace of Jesus. It was not until I visited Israel that I learned the truth of the matter.

The phrase, "city of David", appears 46 times in the Scriptures and identifies three different places in Scripture:

1. Bethlehem - 2 references - both of these references are in the Gospel of Luke and describe the birthplace of Jesus, which was Bethlehem. We do not know why the angel called Bethlehem "The city of David," but it is possible that it is because the city was where David was born and there was an attempt to link Jesus with the lineage of David.
2. Jerusalem - 1 reference
3. "The city of David" - 43 references

I was amazed to discover that there was a place adjoining the city of Jerusalem which is called "the city of David." The "City of David," so special to David, was originally a Jebusite city. It was founded about 3000 B.C. Whenever a city was built, they tried to build it on the highest point in the area so that it could be easily defended. The second major consideration was the availability of water. The "city of David" is located on a hill called "Ophel." Surprisingly, it is not the highest point in the area. On two sides of this triangular hill, however, there are deep natural valleys. This makes it easier to defend. The following map should prove helpful in identifying the location of the city:



DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

A more important point is that the Gihon Spring, where Solomon was anointed king, I Kings 1:38-40, is the only defensible water source in the area and it is located on this hill.¹ There is little doubt but what the location of this spring was a major factor in dictating where the city would be built.

It was during the reign of Hezekiah that a marvelous feat of engineering enabled them to bring the spring, which was located outside the walls, within the confines of the city. Under the pressure of an advancing enemy army, Hezekiah's men began to carve a tunnel out of the soft rock of the area. One group started at the spring while the other group started at the site to which they wanted the spring to flow. They did not follow a straight line, but rather followed an "s" curve. When the two groups finally met there was only a few inches difference in the levels of the channel they were carving.

The location of the city had great commercial importance. All traffic following the North-South ridge must pass through the city of Jerusalem. There were a number of times, in history, when the main highway, "the Way of the Sea," along the Mediterranean, was controlled by an enemy army. At such times the route through Jerusalem was the only available road to travel from Egypt to the North.

The Scriptures teach us that at least 13 kings of Judah and 17 kings in all were buried in the city of David.² The kings are as follows:

David, (I Ki. 2:10); Solomon, (I Ki. 11:43); Abijah, (I Ki. 15:8); Joram, (Jehoram - king of Israel), (II Ki. 8:24); Ahaziah, (II Ki. 9:28); Joash, (II Ki. 12:21); Amaziah, (king of Israel) (II Ki. 14:20); Azariah, (II Ki. 15:7); Jotham, (II Ki. 15:38); Ahaz, (II Ki. 16:20); Rehoboam, (II Ch. 12:16); Asa, (II Ch. 16:148); Jehoshaphat, (II Ch.21:1); Jehoiada, (II Ch. 24:16); Hezekiah, (II Chronicles 32:5.) Interestingly, II Chronicles 24:25 indicates that Jehoiada, a priest, was also buried among the kings in the City of David.

In I Kings there is a verse that lends clarity to this whole issue.

*Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at **Jerusalem** the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the Lord's covenant from **Zion, the city of David.**" I Ki. 8:1*

"The City of David," that place on the hill on the South East side of Jerusalem, not only located a place on the map of Palestine, but also identifies the place where David was most at home. It is the place where he lived and finally died. Jerusalem has been extended several times. It now includes "the City of David", that site which had special significance for David and many other kings of Israel and Judah.

¹ Hershel Shanks, *The City of David*, (Washington: The Biblical Archaeological Society, 1975) p. 19

² Hershel Shanks, loc. cit., p. 68

A HOUSE ON A ROCK?

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall because it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against the house and it fell with a great crash. Matthew 7:24-27

You may remember, as I do, singing a chorus in Sunday School in which the words were a summary of the story recorded above: "The wise man built his house upon a rock..." I liked the chorus because it had a catchy tune, and I especially liked the motions we did as we sang it. When I was a bit older, I remember singing the chorus and enjoying it a little bit less because it raised some questions in my mind, such as:

1. Why is it wise to build a house on a rock, but foolish to build a house on sand? (There were several people, whom I considered very wise, whose homes were built on sand.)
2. Why does this song deal with rains? What difference would rain make?
3. Why would anyone build his house in a flood area in the first place?
4. Why would a house, built on sand, fall down, but a house built on a rock would not?

Have you ever asked these questions? I did not understand what Jesus' story was about, but the multitude, who listened to the Sermon on the Mount, knew exactly what He was saying. In the time of Jesus, people in the cities of Israel lived in houses; people who lived away from cities lived in tents. I do not think I ever saw a tent in all of Israel pitched on top of a hill. They were always pitched in a "wadi," which is the area where two hills meet, or as the dictionary defines it, "valley, ravine or watercourse that is dry except in the rainy season."¹

Israel does not have four seasons as we do in America. The countries of the Near East have only two seasons: a rainy season, from January through March or April, and a dry season for the rest of the year. That part of the world does not have much rain, but when it does rain, the water poses a problem. In the area where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, they might have only two inches of rain in a whole year. In the desert regions, the land is either nearly barren rock with very little dirt covering it, or soil which is almost totally sand. Therefore, when it does rain, very little moisture soaks into the ground. Nearly all of it runs off. Even with only an inch or two of rain, severe flash floods can occur.

Because of this fact, the Bedouins never pitch their tents in the bottom of a wadi during the winter, but rather above the water line to protect themselves from flash floods that are a part of the rainy season every year. If they did not, their tents would be washed away.

¹ Jean McKechnie, Ed., *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Of The English Language Unabridged*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983) p. 2053

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

These tents, however, are set up below the crest of the hill to protect them from the fierce, cold winds that come every winter.



To begin with, in almost every instance you know that the bottom of a wadi is going to be the center of a flash flood each year during the rainy season. The silt that you see on the bottom of a wadi is the debris left in the wake of the flood. It is not really safe to pitch a tent, or build a house, less than ten or twelve feet above the silt and debris left following the flood of the previous year. This picture gives you an idea of how the floods leave silt and debris on the bottom of the wadi.

A stranger, or a local person who is not too wise, might see the sand and think that it would be a very comfortable place to pitch a tent because it is so flat and smooth. An experienced person would know better.

Jesus used this story to draw a parallel between those who practice the errors about which He taught and the wise man who heard His teachings and obeyed them. Jesus also used the story to draw a parallel between people who heard Him but did not practice what He had taught, and the man who would foolishly build his house on the sand that seemed so safe, but was really an invitation to disaster.

AS I WALKED ALONG

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.' Acts 17:22, 23

As you know, Paul made this statement while addressing the Areopagus. The "Areopagus" was a designation for two things:

1. A 377 foot high rocky place just northwest of the Acropolis in Athens.
2. A court group who met regularly at this auspicious site.

One cannot be certain, but it is this writer's considered opinion that Paul is speaking to the court of civic leaders who regularly met on the site called "Areopagus."

This court was originally designed to deal with criminal concerns; but it had also become a kind of forum for religious and educational concerns.¹ This is significant because the city was sensitive to Western culture and religious practice.

Cities under Roman control and influence were carefully designed to reflect that dominance. Roman society was carefully organized, a fact clearly revealed in their architecture. The Romans tended to be a people of many gods, but Rome felt no need to rid the conquered peoples of their former religious practices and allegiance.

Because the Romans practiced emperor worship, they felt the need to at least pressure captive peoples to **add** emperor worship to their previous practices, if they were unable to undercut the conquered nations' worship altogether. Throughout much of southeastern Europe this inclusion of emperor worship eventually took place. However, it was never even close to being universally accepted in Israel.

Because most of these cultures were polytheistic (having many gods), the architecture of their cities needed to reflect this worship and religious commitment. I never really understood this situation. When I read the words of Paul about seeing an altar as he walked along, I wondered just what that would be like. Did they just place an altar along the road? Didn't that seem cold and distant?

On a trip to Israel, I stopped over in Amman, Jordan. I visited the nearby city of Jerash or Gerasa as it was called in earlier times. This totally excavated city was a marvel to visit. As I walked down the main street of the city, I noticed that it was lined with a low colonnaded wall. Behind the waist-high wall were shops and homes. As I walked along, I noticed that at measured intervals there were niches or alcoves in the colonnaded wall. In earlier times, each niche held one of the idols revered by at least some of the people of Gerasa. I also noticed that at street intersections there were four-sided places of worship where the passers-by were expected to give some sign of respect or worship. Just passing along in front of these alcoves and shrines was considered, to some degree, an act of worship.

One can readily understand that this would be very repulsive to any serious Hebrew. Add to this the fact that just entering a Gentile settlement made a Jew ceremonially unclean.

When Israel was ready to cross over the Jordan into Canaan, Moses issued very strong warnings against becoming involved in heathen worship and practices. This was precisely

¹ Merrill F. Unger, Op. Cit., p. 86

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

the issue in I Kings 18:18-40 when Elijah and the prophets of Baal were locked in challenge to decide who was God in Israel.

Paul, in the passage from Acts, was saying to the Aeropagus Court, that as he walked along the road, with its carefully designed altars to the many gods whom the Athenians worshipped, he saw one that caught his eye. The designers intended it to be a way of not overlooking any deity. Paul pointed out that this was in fact the God of the universe, the God above all gods.

THE PIT

'Here comes that dreamer' they said to each other. 'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns, and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams. Genesis 37:19, 20

My first encounter with this passage was in the King James Version where it says "pit" instead of "cistern." I can remember, as a child, wondering why Joseph didn't just climb out of the "pit" and escape. I thought of the "pit" as something like a triple-deep basement that would be hard to get out of, but not impossible. These cisterns were different. If a person were placed in one of these cisterns, he would not be able to get out without assistance. Archaeologists have discovered the bones of several people in the dry bottoms of some of these cisterns. These people for one reason or another were in the cistern and could not get out. It would be possible for another person to drop a rope to them and haul the person out. In fact, that seems to be the way Joseph was finally rescued from this "pit." The Hebrew word in Genesis 37:20, 22, is the word for cistern.

It appears there were several ways to collect water in that part of the world. Notice what is mentioned in II Kings:

And he said, 'This is what the Lord says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the Lord says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink.' II Kings 3:16, 17

The word for "trench" or "ditch" is different from the word "pit." There are occasions, however, when this word was used to describe a cistern-type of excavation. In Ex. 21:33, 34 we are reminded that there was a law in Israel to warn of the danger of an animal falling into a pit. It said:

If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit must pay for the loss; he must pay the owner and the dead animal will be his. Exodus 21:33, 34

I also remember wondering about the wording from one of the Psalms:

He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on himself... Psalms 7:15, 16a

If a man dug it in the first place, why can't he get out if he falls into it, I thought, not realizing that the person who dug such a cistern would need a ladder or rope in order to get out when he was finished.

We need to remember that Palestine is a land of insufficient rainfall. Granted, there are areas, like Jerusalem, where the average rainfall is 26 inches per year. On the other

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

hand, there are other areas, like Jericho, where the average rainfall is 5.5 inches per year.¹ Still farther to the south, along the Dead Sea, there is an average of two to three inches. To add further to the difficulties of the people in this area, when rain does come, it inevitably results in flash floods because the soil is so poor that the water cannot sink in. In such situations, unless some arrangement is made to store what little rain they receive, people and animals cannot survive.

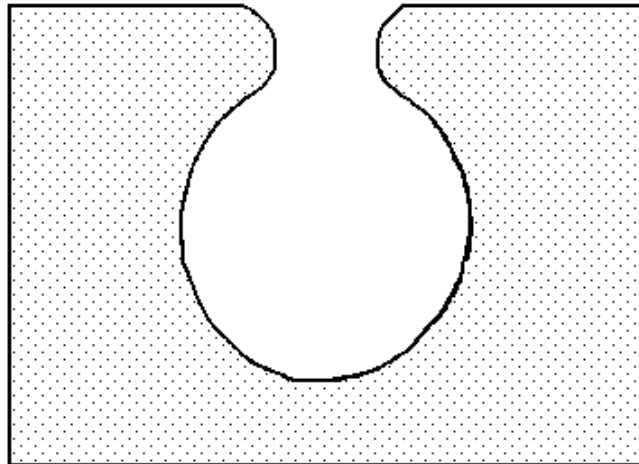
The whole passage of Genesis 37:20-22 took on a different view when I discovered that the word should in fact be "cistern" rather than "pit," especially when I found some information about a cistern.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia identifies a "pit" in these terms:

*A pit may be any cavity in the ground; "be'aer" especially refers to a cistern, hewn to collect rains.*²

Notice that the description speaks not of something dug, but hewn, and this indicates that such a structure was made of rock. This rock, however, is very soft and not difficult to carve. On one of my visits to Israel we went into a deep cistern. High on the wall we could see the mark of the tool used to carve the rock. The print of the tool was eight to ten inches long rather than one inch long, which would indicate carving hard rock. Because the rock is very porous, water can seep out of such a cistern. This made it necessary for them to coat the inside with lime plaster.

We might think of a "cistern" as having a large opening at the top so that rain can get in. There may have been some like this, but most were not. Most cisterns were narrow at the top and are shaped like a bottle or bell toward the bottom.³ They would look something like this:



¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Gen. Ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) p. 702

² Op. cit., Bromiley, Volume III, p. 874

³ Op. cit., Bromiley, Vol. I, p. 702

THE PIT

Cisterns were not used exclusively for the storing of water. When the cistern was empty of water, during the dry season, it could serve as a prison. This is what Joseph's brothers had in mind for him. This is also what was involved when Jeremiah was placed in a cistern which doubled as a prison (Jeremiah 38:7-13).

Cisterns also served as hiding places. Look at II Samuel 17:21 where the men of David hid in the "well," or "cistern," so that Absalom's men could not find them. There are many examples of cisterns throughout Palestine. When you visit Qumram, you can see six cisterns where the flash flood waters were collected for the use of the community through the balance of the year. There are 37 cisterns under the Temple Mount, one of which is 43 feet deep and holds 7.5 million gallons.⁴ At Gezer is a cistern 23 feet long by 12 feet wide and 94.5 feet deep. At Megiddo is another cistern which is 64 feet deep and 214 feet long.

Private cisterns are plentiful throughout Palestine:

Many modern buildings in Jerusalem are like those of biblical times in having private cisterns, filled by rainwater from the roof. The Old Testament speaks of ordinary citizens enjoying the water of their own cisterns (II Kings 18:31), and thousands of small cisterns have been found on the sites of ancient cities (e.g., Gezer, Beth-shemesh, Debir, and Tel en-Nasbeh, as well as Jerusalem).⁵

Certainly, the recipients of the book of Revelation fully understood the image that John used when he, on nine occasions, used "the pit" or "the bottomless pit" to refer to a place of incarceration. The discovery of what a "pit" was, made a big difference in my understanding. With this information, I believe we can understand the text much as they would have understood it:

He threw him (Satan) into the abyss (pit), and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. Revelation 20:3

John has taken a situation which every Jew would understand very well and used it to describe a spiritual truth which was not well understood. I do not believe John is talking about a literal cistern that Satan is going to be thrown into and then sealed. To talk about a cistern in any other term than a place to collect water was to think in terms of a place of detention. John is saying that Satan is not only bound, but that he does not have the opportunity of escape. The idea of locking or sealing the "pit" simply means that there is no way for anyone else to assist in the escape from this place of detention.

⁴ Ibid., p. 702

⁵ Ibid., p. 702

THE PRODIGAL SONS

The parable of the Prodigal Son is told only by the Evangelist Luke. Officially, people refer to this parable as The Prodigal Son. That is a misnomer. By any calculation, this man had two prodigal sons. The directions of their waywardness were different, but prodigal nevertheless.

This is a parable. We must assume, therefore, that it was probably not a true story, but one intended to take a scenario that the people understood well and use it to convey a spiritual truth that was not as well known. It is not always true, but there is often a degree of shock, a moment of scandal in a parable to make it unforgettable. That certainly is the case in this one.

Note the reason given for the three parables in Luke 15. Luke wrote:

Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathered around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable: Luke 15:1-3a

There followed three parables, all of which dealt with lostness. There is a progression in the parables:

1. The Lost Sheep
2. The Lost Coins.
3. The Lost Sons

Each of the parables deals with something valuable that was lost. In each parable that which was lost was found. In each parable rejoicing followed the finding of the lost. You get the impression that Jesus told the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in order to place a strong emphasis on the story of the Lost Sons.

If you study the parable of the Prodigal Son carefully, it quickly becomes clear that Jesus is talking about the father and not so much the erring sons. It is a masterful picture of the love and mercy of the father. The love and forgiveness of this father are almost impossible to miss. Jesus was saying, to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, that He consorted with the tax collectors and "sinners" because the Father loved them in spite of their wandering ways. O what a picture of the love of God!

This entire story is a collection of many cultural phenomena that would be well understood by the people to whom Luke wrote, but they totally escape us. This is because we are not familiar with the culture of Jesus' day. Our task is to explore this parable with you. We want to spell out the meaning of these cultural details that add so much to the meaning of what Jesus was saying to those who were trying to trap Him.

THE FATHER RAN TO GREET HIS SON

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son. Luke 15:20b

Jesus was describing a household of great wealth. There were servants here; an inheritance to be divided; a ring to use in purchasing; a long robe which identified people of means. Such a family had servants whose task it was to welcome guests and wash their feet. The initial greeting would be by a servant and not by the head of the house.

There are a number of facets to this story which would have been surprising to the people who heard Jesus speak. No member of a wealthy family would ever come out of the house to greet a person who was coming to visit. It would have been considered degrading to the whole family to act in such a way. The greeting would take place inside the house and not out in the street.

You may remember the story of Jephthah which is told in the book of Judges. This story refers to the same issue Jesus was dealing with in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Israel was in a military bind. Jephthah was a righteous man and he deeply desired to be victorious for God in battle. He took a vow which was costly, but did not seem to be nearly as costly at first as it turned out to be. This was the oath Jephthah took before God.

If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. Judges 11:30, 31

Jephthah knew that no member of his family would ever come out to greet him. That would be culturally unacceptable. It would seem certain that Jephthah thought that the most he could lose through this vow might be his dog or the lowest servant in his household. Certainly he would never anticipate that a member of his family would dare to come out to meet him. His daughter would certainly know better.

The thing that makes the story of Jephthah pertinent here is that his daughter ignored the cultural prohibition and ran out to meet her father. This posed a dilemma for Jephthah. He had vowed, before God, to make a burnt offering of the one who first came from his house to greet him. Jephthah must now either keep his vow and thus lose his daughter to a horrible death or preserve the life of his daughter by breaking his vow with God. The last option was unthinkable to him.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus said that the man "ran to his son." This wealthy man would be expected to wear a long robe to indicate his elevated position in the community. It would be unacceptable for him to leave his house to greet his son or anyone else. It would be difficult to run in that robe without falling down or exposing his ankles, another unacceptable idea. Look at the way Hebrews 12:1 describes a runner.

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Hebrews 12:1, 2

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

This is a picture of an Olympic runner. These athletes ran in the nude. The author draws an impossible picture in order to get the point across - a runner cannot win a race wearing a rich man's robe. The robe would get tangled up in his legs and cause him to stumble.

The father in the story Jesus told would have to lift the hem of his robe in order to run. The moment he did this, his ankles would be exposed and he would be publicly embarrassed before the entire community. As Jesus told the story, the father set aside the customs appropriate for his station in life in order to go out and greet his son. The fact that he saw the son a long way off suggests that he had been watching for the son on a regular basis. It could also mean that he went out to meet the son in the hope that he could get to him before any from the village encountered him and vented their wrath upon him because of the way he treated his father, for that is the way village people treat a wayward son.

The people of that part of the world had a practice to deal with unfortunate conduct. When a person did something very repulsive to their family or to the community, the town's people would break a clay pot in the presence of the person to indicate the broken relationship. The town's people might also do physical violence to the person, but they would certainly ostracize him in a manner somewhat like the "shunning" of the Amish people in America. They would avoid the person altogether and have absolutely nothing to do with him. They would neither touch him nor anything that he had touched. He was treated like a leper, and this was particularly true if he lost or sold his property to a Gentile.

In Luke 15, Jesus uses three parables to highlight our lost condition: separation from God. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tells of the father's running out to meet his wayward son in order to protect the son and show just how anxious God the Father was to see His lost sons returned and restored to His family. In the parable, the father was willing to sustain ultimate humiliation in order to restore his wayward son. Jesus told the story in this way in order to accomplish two things:

1. He wanted the Pharisees to see just how devastating it was for the Father to see His creation lost and alienated from Himself.
2. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to discover just how far the Father was willing to go in order to restore His wandering sons, the publicans and sinners, the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, to Himself.

This is one of the most beautiful and complete pictures of the compassion of God, expressed toward people who have turned away from Him in order to follow their own ways, and are returning home.

No price was too great to pay; no humiliation too great to endure in order to restore the rebellious to the family again. That is an awesome picture of who God is!

THE VERY BEST ROBE

But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! bring the best robe and put it on him...' Luke 15:22a

People of the Middle East, in the first century, did not wear three-piece suits. This was a climate which regularly shifts from exceptionally hot conditions during the day to very cold conditions at night. Basic clothing consisted of five things:

1. A covering for the head
2. Sandals - these were shoes worn by the middle and upper class. Slaves were seldom permitted to wear them.
3. An undergarment - much like a loincloth
4. A tunic - a garment extended from the shoulders to the ankles. The working class wore shorter garments which would not inhibit their brisk activity.
5. A cloak - a loose garment which would only be worn during the coldest times of the day, particularly at night. Jewish law allowed a lender to hold a borrower's cloak as a form of insurance that the borrower would repay the loan. However, the law went on to say that though the lender could hold the cloak, it had to be returned to the borrower before nightfall. This was because the borrower would have no protection against the bitter cold nights in that part of the world. It was also required that the borrower bring the cloak back to the lender the first thing in the morning.

The "best robe" was a "stola." Vine, a modern language scholar, describes it in these terms:

*Stola denotes any stately robe, a long garment reaching to the feet or with a train behind. It is used of the long clothing in which the scribes walked, making themselves conspicuous in the eyes of men.*¹

The body covering worn by servants was of the simplest material possible. The "best robe," on the other hand, was made of the finest materials available. It would be made of much finer, lighter material than even the middle class would be able to secure. It would be more skillfully made than most any other garment available. The same is true today. You can purchase a suit of clothes rather inexpensively, but if you have the necessary funds, you can purchase a very finely tailored suit made of the best materials. This robe would hang from the shoulders to the floor. It was made in such a way that when a person sat down on the floor, the feet would be covered. This was because they felt it was a sign of reverence or awe to cover one's feet. It is not surprising that in Isaiah 6:2 the seraphim covered their feet with one pair of wings. They were in the presence of the Holy God.

The "stola" was also made with wide sleeves. The more important the person, the wider the sleeves. It was a way of showing just how important or wealthy a person was. We should note that both the length of the robe and the width of the sleeves made it almost

¹ John R. Kohlenberger III, Ed., Op. Cit., p. 191

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

impossible for the wearer to do any kind of vigorous work. This was clearly a garment for those who were able to have others do the work for them.

What difference would this robe make? First, the son had asked to be accepted as one of the servants. The son had been working as a servant of the lowest kind. It would be expected that he would be wearing servants' garb as he returned home. The robe would make it clear that the father was not accepting the request that his wandering son be accepted as a servant. It was not only a way to bring him into the house, but he was being brought back as part of the family and with honor.

Secondly, by placing the robe on the son, the father was making an announcement. He was honoring his returning son and thus all of his servants would know to do the same. It was also a message to the community that this man was to be treated with respect.

Thirdly, this was a visual way, which no one could miss, for the father to say that his son was forgiven and restored. It is as though the son had never done the wrong. Everyone would understand that this son, despite his previous conduct, was forgiven and welcomed home. More importantly, every time the son saw his coat he would be reminded that he was forgiven.

There are several scholars who believe that the "best robe" was more than a fine garment. They believe that it was a special garment that was reserved for the eldest son, the heir of the family, and that this was the meaning of the coat of many colors that was worn by Joseph and caused the furor among his brothers. We cannot be sure if this is true or not. If it is true, think of what this says to the rebellious son! Can you imagine the impact this would have on the elder brother who had been anticipating his place of leadership in the family for a lifetime?

Still other scholars believe that this was a ceremonial robe to identify the wearer as an honored guest, the mark of high distinction. Jeremias, a modern, German biblical scholar, makes this suggestion and uses the story of Joseph, in Genesis 41:42, to illustrate the point.

When Joseph was appointed chief vizier (minister of state) he received from Pharaoh a ring, a robe of fine linen and a golden chain. First comes the ceremonial robe, which in the East is a mark of high distinction... When the king wishes to honor a deserving official he presents him with a costly robe. ²

Whatever the precise symbol, the father is trying to convey a message to his son and the whole community. He wants everyone to know of his great joy that the wandering son has returned home. He wants everyone to know that the son has been forgiven, that no matter what the boy has done, it is as though he had never left home.

This is part of a parable, an earthly story which sheds light on a spiritual reality. This rags-to-riches story deals with the lost state of humankind. The erring son had lost everything in his debauched lifestyle. The son was lost; he had been considered dead by the father, the family and the community. He deserved only his servant rags, the consequences of his evil choices. The father shocked his wandering son by giving him a robe of honor and distinction when he was only asked for a place as a servant.

² Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables Of Jesus*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Press, 1972) p. 130

THE VERY BEST ROBE

It is entirely possible that the "best robe" does not refer to the quality of the merchandise so much as it does to the symbol of the garment. Many scholars believe that this is the kind of robe that was given to Joseph, in the book of Genesis. His brothers were not angry because he received a robe of better quality than their own. Their anger was over the fact that though he was, at that time, the youngest son in the family, he had received the coat of many colors, the symbol of the inheritor in the family. This gift from their father identified Joseph as the one who would rule the family when father was gone. This was almost more than the other brothers could handle. It is entirely possible that this was Jesus' intention when He spoke of the "best robe".

The real message of this parable has to do with God. When we come to Him, as undeserving as the younger son, God does not grudgingly receive us. He prepares such a celebration that the whole world knows that we are absolutely forgiven. That is the kind of God He is, and that is the message Jesus was trying to convey in this entire parable.

A RING FOR HIS FINGER

But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger.' Luke 15:22

For many years I read the story Jesus told and completely missed the meaning of some of these words.

As I had previously thought that the "best robe" was just an expensive replacement for the son's tattered servant clothes, so I thought that the ring was just a piece of jewelry. It seemed like a way to do something nice for a son who had been rebellious and needed something to show him that he was not rejected.

A ring was more than just jewelry.

Excavations have shown that the ring is to be regarded as a signet-ring; the gift of a ring signified the bestowal of authority. (cf. I Macc. 6:15) ¹

This symbol then makes it clear that the father was trying to help the son see that his forgiveness completely disregarded the son's former misguided ways. This father not only forgave his son, he also gave him the signet, the sign of authority and control in the family.

If you go to almost any museum where there is a Middle East display, you may find a series of these rings. Two kinds of rings were used in Palestine: A ring worn on the finger, and a decorated cylinder which was worn on a chain around the neck.

Into the surface of the ring or cylinder a delicate design was carved. This design was the signet of the entire family. The ring would be pressed or the cylinder would be rolled through the soft wax or clay, and the design carved into the stone would then be embossed into the wax or soft clay. A wealthy person, who owned a ring or cylinder, signed the bill for purchases made by pressing his ring into some soft wax that was placed on the bill, and everyone in the community would know whose signature it was. The design was as distinctive as the person's name. The ring or cylinder can be thought of as the first-century plastic money - the credit card of the day.

In the book of Esther is a very obvious use of the signet ring. Mordecai, whose life had been threatened by Haman, was ultimately elevated by the king to the second position in the realm. Mordecai was placed in authority over Haman's house. This is how the author of Esther described the promotion.

The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate. Esther 8:2

Somewhat later, Mordecai used the ring to sign the king's name on a royal document which was being sent to the leaders in all 127 provinces of the land. The author of Esther described it in these terms:

¹ Jeremias, op. cit., p. 130

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king. Esther 8:10

Obviously this ring was the symbol of the king's purse and power which had been bestowed upon Mordecai because of the way he had been so loyal to the king. This is precisely the kind of ring being described in the parable Jesus told.

Think for a minute about this prodigal son receiving the ring. Here was a young man who took his part of the inheritance and wasted in a short time what his father had worked a lifetime to accumulate. The young man came home penniless and his father accepted him and gave him the family checkbook. Can you imagine the shock and horror experienced by those who heard the story Jesus was telling? Nothing like that would ever have happened in any village of which they knew. Jesus was not trying to tell a plausible story. He wanted to tell a story which they would never forget in order to convey a message which they had not been able to understand before.

Put yourself in the son's position. You have squandered your father's fortune and have nothing to show for it. You come home prepared for rejection and your father not only welcomes you, but to your shock and amazement, he gives you the family checkbook! What would you think? Wouldn't you be so overwhelmed you couldn't speak? Wouldn't you be so excited that you couldn't find words to express your joy?

This is precisely the message Jesus was trying to convey about what happens when lost people return to God. They come expecting rejection, but He welcomes them back into His family. Most of us are keenly aware of the extent of our sin. What we need to discover is just how forgiving and merciful God really is. A significant witness to new-found forgiveness is not a stress on how bad one was, but on just how great the forgiveness of God is by restoring us to the family again.

THE FATTED CALF

Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Luke 15:23a

In our country, people usually have meat almost every day, so the intense meaning of this instruction of Luke 15 can easily elude us. The Jewish people were mostly vegetarian. It was not because they had anything against eating meat, it just was not possible, because of the expense and the fact that it was not usually available. This is a surprise to some people because they know that many of the Jews, like David's family, had herds of sheep. That is true, but the sheep were not so much a source for meat as they were the family bank account. Even among the Arabs today, the sheep provide wool for their tents and clothes while the goats provide milk for their food. However, they eat very little of the meat from the flock.

Notice that this was a **fatted** calf. It means that the animal was quite young. It was also kept in a special place so that it would not run so much. This accomplished two things: first, the animal would gain weight. Second, the meat of this animal would not be as tough as that of an animal that had run free.

With the above facts in mind, the killing of a fatted calf would be reserved for a very special occasion. Passover was one such event and a wedding was another. The text does not say so, but it may well have been that this animal was being reserved for the wedding feast of the elder son. If that were the case, the fury of the elder son could be better understood. There were few other events so important that such an extravagance could be justified.

We must also remember, as is mentioned on page 22, that this meal was not just the celebration of joy when the lost was found. It was also a symbol of the forgiveness offered to the younger son by his father. The father wanted his son and the whole community to know that the son had been forgiven and welcomed back into the family.

Just think of what this would say to the son who had returned. He had thought of himself as a failure and an outcast. His father, on the other hand, treated him as someone important. The wandering son was so important to his father that he joyfully killed one of his prize animals in order to celebrate his son's return. That was certainly a symbol which had to carry both great joy and a flood of tears for the wanderer who had returned.

In each of the three parables of Luke 15, the lost was found and a celebration ensued. You will remember that these three parables followed a complaint by the Pharisees that Jesus was spending His time with tax collectors and other sinners. To the shock and horror of these religious leaders, Jesus was saying that He spent time with such people because they were lost and because they were so important to Him and to His father that He wanted them to be restored and forgiven. Remember, the Pharisees considered tax-collectors to be unpardonable.

If you have ever sinned grievously, and most of us have, you understand just how the younger son felt. You know the shock of realizing that you do not deserve a place in the family, but you feel the great tension and severe pain of sins unforgiven. Something within us desperately wants to know that our family understands and forgives.

If your family has stood by you during those times when you were not at your best, you also know what it was like to be welcomed back, not as a tragic outcast, but as a member of the family. You feel like an honored guest.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

This picture of restoration gives us some insight into just what the younger son felt. It gives us an inkling of just how great the forgiveness of God is in our lives. The truth is that this parable tells us a great deal more about the Father than it does about the exhilaration of the son. Jesus was trying to focus our attention on just how loving and forgiving the Father is, not on how sinful we are. The parable answers the question of the Pharisees concerning the reason Jesus spent time with the outcasts -- the publicans and sinners.

LET'S HAVE A FEAST

Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Luke 15:23, 24

As you pondered these verses in the past, what did you think? Did you think that this feast was a way of expressing great joy? Did you think it was a Jewish way of expressing positive emotions? I must confess, that is what I thought. There is some reason to think this way, for the text plainly says, "let's have a feast and celebrate." But there is much more than a celebration in these words.

This is a parable. Vine, a more modern language scholar, defines a parable as,

A narrative or saying, dealing with earthly things with a spiritual meaning.¹

This being the case, it is necessary to not only discover what the parable itself says, but to also discover the spiritual meaning which is conveyed by the earthly story. If you look in Luke 15:1-5, you will note that there was a specific reason why Jesus told three parables in succession in this passage.

In Luke 15:1, the writer gives us this insight:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Luke 15:1, 2

As the text indicates, there are two reasons why Jesus told the three parables about lostness:

1. Because the tax collectors and sinners were gathering to listen to Him, and
2. because the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were muttering about His welcoming of and dining with publicans and sinners.

In view of these facts, Jesus proceeded to tell three earthly narratives about lostness: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Lost Sons. Each of these three parables conveys a specific teaching about God's relationship to those who are lost.

You may remember, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, which might be more appropriately called the parable of the Merciful Father, the youngest son did some shocking things. These were things that the people of that culture thought of as unacceptable and worthy of severe punishment, both by the father and the community. The younger son made some tragic mistakes:

1. He demanded his inheritance before his father died.
2. He wasted the family inheritance in a very short time and in evil ways. Both of these situations were most unacceptable to the devout Jews.

¹ John R. Kohlenberger III, Ed., Op. Cit., p. 830

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

3. He had the nerve to come back penniless after he had humiliated his family before the whole community.

In the parable, the father instructed his servants to prepare a feast. It is important to remember that a feast was a rarity even for the rich. In most instances these people ate meat on two occasions. One was the regular observance of Passover, the other occasion was at a wedding feast. Otherwise, these people were usually vegetarian. This was not because they were against eating meat or had religious scruples against it. It was because they did not have the meat to eat.

In the minds of the Jewish people there were at least three basic meanings for a feast:

1. A celebration of unusual joy as you would experience at a wedding.
2. A feast, or at least a meal, was used as a way to finalize a covenant made between two people. In our time when heads of state have met to sign a treaty, they inevitably follow this procedure with a banquet. This tradition comes out of this Near Eastern custom.
3. A feast was also prepared when there was healing between two enemies and this needed to be demonstrated to the community.

This feast was one of several ways with which Jewish people indicate that forgiveness had been extended. It was part of the following:

1. Share the kiss of forgiveness
2. Welcome a person to receive the hospitality of your home and carry them into the house.
3. Eat a meal with the person. The people of the area would only eat with people with whom they were on friendly terms.
4. At the meal of forgiveness the former enemy would be offered to share the host's salt.

All of these symbols said, in graphic ways, that the sins of the past had been forgiven and they were no longer enemies.

In the parable, the father commanded his servants to prepare a feast so that they could celebrate. More than this, the father gave the instructions for the feast because he wanted people to understand what had happened. He wanted his son to know that though he had done a terrible thing, all was forgiven. In the family it was as though the boy had done nothing wrong.

The father also wanted his neighbors to know that the boy had been forgiven, lest they shun the boy and do him harm. Now they would know that the sin was forgiven and the boy had been restored. People of that day would shake their heads if this happened in their community. It is not how they would deal with their own children or neighbors. Jesus was talking about His Father and that is precisely the way He treats sinners who have done indescribable wrongs, but are still His children, the objects of His endless love.

DEAD AND ALIVE

Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found. Luke 15:23b, 24

Some have taken this to mean that the son was gone and not heard from in such a long time that he was considered dead. This is not what the father was talking about at all.

In that culture, if a child brought shame upon the family in any way, the father would announce that his child was considered dead and literally a funeral would be held. Following the service and the time of mourning, the father would announce to the family that he did not have a child by that name and that this child's name may never be mentioned again to him or within his household.

You may remember the story of the Fiddler On The Roof. When the daughter, Hodel, married a Gentile, Tusca held a time of mourning and declared that he had no daughter by that name and forbade the mention of her name in his household again. Even today, if a child of an Orthodox Jewish family becomes a Christian, a funeral is held. Many times these new Jewish Christians attend their own funeral, but when the service is over, the family will brush past them and are not able to speak to them and their name will never be mentioned within the family again.

This is what the father is talking about. His son was considered dead because the family had been shamed by the boy's actions and had held a funeral for him. He was considered dead to them.

Now that the boy had returned, the father had forgiven him. The father held a feast to announce the boy's forgiveness. Because of that, the father could officially consider his son alive again and thus he could re-enter the home and be considered a part of the family again.

Notice how the father describes the son's situation:

For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. Luke 15:24

The first thing to remember is that the boy had not died. The younger son had been considered dead because of his shameful conduct, but because of the events of this day, he was forgiven and restored again. The son had been morally and socially lost, but because of his return and the forgiveness offered by the father, he was found.

Imagine the shock of the Pharisees and others who listened to the story Jesus was telling. Certainly, they had never heard of a father being so merciful when a son had shamed the family. This was a form of mercy that they had never experienced before. As Jesus answered the probing questions of the Pharisees, he was telling them something about the limitless love of the Father that they found almost impossible to comprehend. God loved the rebel so much that He would accept him back no matter what he had done; no matter how much shame he had brought upon the family. The mercy of God was always greater than the shame the sinner had brought upon the family.

The parable was told in response to a question about why Jesus spent time with publicans and sinners. As you can see, Jesus' answer was that the lost were so important He couldn't afford not to be with the people about whom the Father cares so deeply.

THE KISS

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. Luke 15:20b

The idea of a man kissing another man may sound strange for the modern Western reader. This is in part because a man kissing a man has some very unfortunate social connotations in our culture today.

First, we must remember that in the story of the Prodigal Son, it was a man kissing his son. Secondly, the kiss was a form of greeting. In the Near East there were at least four basic kinds of greetings, and they differed in relation to the closeness of the people involved:

1. A face-to-face greeting - It required no personal contact. It sometimes required only the wave of a hand or the shout of "hello." We might express this with "hello", "good morning" or a general handshake.

2. The formal kiss - "phileo" - in Greek. This is reserved for those to whom one reserves a deeper friendship and relationship. This would be expressed by placing your hands on the other person's shoulders and drawing them closer to you. You would then kiss the person on one cheek and then on the other. This is practiced in Eastern cultures today. This is also what Jesus referred to in Luke 7:45 when Simon the Pharisee failed to greet him in the appropriate fashion. A woman of the street, however, came in and began kissing His feet and did not stop. She was expressing just what Jesus meant to her changed life. This, too, was Paul's intent when he told the Christians to greet each other with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16).

3. The intimate kiss - "kataphileo" in Greek. This greeting was a mouth-to-mouth kiss intended to indicate deep affection. Apparently this was the kind of kiss that Judas gave to Jesus. The Greek, in Luke 22:48, tells us that Judas kissed Jesus repeatedly. Jesus expressed shock that Judas would betray him with this kind of intimate greeting.

4. The bow - This greeting was usually reserved for a person who was unusually honored. It was done in three ways:

- a. A bow of the head recognized the honor of the person.
- b. A bow from the waist honored a person of even greater stature.
- c. To fall prostrate before a person's feet was the ultimate greeting of respect and honor.¹

Jesus spoke of the father's kiss using the word "kataphileo", which is the very intimate, fervent kiss. At the very least, Jesus used this word to convey the idea of acceptance. When a tragedy of this magnitude, i.e., the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, fractured a family, there would usually be some unfortunate words and some form of rejection shared on both sides. The intimate kiss would make it very clear that these feelings either

¹ Ralph Gower, *The Manners And Customs of Bible Times*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987) p. 242, 243

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

were not real or had been drastically changed. Jeremias, in his book, **The Parables Of Jesus**, speaks of this situation as a "Kiss of Forgiveness." ² He mentions II Samuel 14:33 as evidence. This is the story of David receiving his alienated son Absalom back. The text reads:

Then the king summoned Absalom and he came in and bowed down with his face to the ground before the king. And the king kissed Absalom. II Samuel 14:33

When David kissed Absalom, it was the intimate kiss which said to Absalom that there was a change in David's attitude toward him.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father kissed the son before the boy had a chance to say anything. He did not kiss the son because he came to a certain level of repentance. He kissed the boy because he had come home; because he wanted the boy to know that he was forgiven.

Again, if you were that son, what would you feel? You certainly would be amazed at the indescribable mercy of your father. You would sense a depth of love that would be shocking because you anticipated only rejection and rebuff. There would be an astonishing discovery that such an unusual forgiveness could possibly be yours. There would be a sense of release; a sense of value and direction in life after all.

Jesus was responding to a question about why He spent time with the publicans, the prostitutes, the sinners, the seeming unpardonables. They were thought to be unpardonable because the prostitutes violated one of the ten commandments and should have been stoned to death. The publicans were thought unpardonable because they were in league with a pagan, conquering nation. This made them guilty, in the minds of the Jews, of both idolatry and treason. Both of these crimes were punishable by being stoned to death. Jesus described a situation which was about as repulsive as a Hebrew could imagine. For a son to act as the Prodigal did would be a violation of the commandment to honor one's father and mother. It was extremely repulsive to the cultural mores of the Jewish people. Jesus painted a picture of the father forgiving what most Jews would consider an unpardonable sin. Jesus was telling them that in the eyes of God there was no one who was unpardonable, no one beyond the limitless love of the Father. (The crucifixion of Jesus was to pardon every form of every sin. There were some, however, who placed themselves outside the realm of forgiveness by rejecting the sacrifice of Jesus and the ministry of the Holy Spirit whereby this sacrifice was mediated for their forgiveness. Without the sacrifice of Jesus there was no other possible means of forgiveness. God still wanted to forgive them, but they rejected the only means possible for that to be accomplished.) Think about it for a minute -- how much clearer could Jesus make the boundless love of the Father?!

² Joachim Jeremias, Op. Cit., p. 130

SANDALS

Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Luke 15:22b

In our country, where few people have less than two pairs of shoes and many people have dozens of pairs, it is difficult to grasp the significance of this portion of the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus' words suggest the possibility that the younger son came home walking barefooted. He came to his father as a slave would come.

Shoes were a very symbolic item of clothing. There was special meaning both to being barefooted and wearing shoes.

The meaning of being barefooted:

- a. It was a sign of respect for a holy place. When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, He said to him,

'Do not come any closer,' God said, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' Exodus 3:5

- a. There is no mention of priests ever wearing shoes when they attended the temple or tabernacle. To this day, Moslem people remove their shoes upon entering their place of worship.
- b. Being barefooted was a sign of mourning. When Ezekiel's wife died, God instructed him, in Ezekiel 24:7, not to mourn; not to remove his sandals.
- c. The removal of the sandal was also a sign of reproach. In Deuteronomy 25:9, if a widow's brother-in-law refused to fulfill the levirate responsibility¹ to his brother, she could remove his shoe publicly and spit in his face to disgrace him.
- d. The removal and transfer of a sandal was also part of a legal transaction. This is explained in the book of Ruth:

(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) Ruth 4:7

The origin of this legal custom is a source of conjecture. It is one way to symbolize an action that had been taken so that others would become aware of it without having to be told.

- e. The removal of shoes was required of slaves and captives, a necessity of the extremely poor. It was a symbol of captivity in Isaiah 20:2.
- f. In Psalms 60:8 it is a symbol of God taking possession of a land and meting out punishment. David described it this way:

¹ If a man died and left no offspring, his oldest brother was required, by the levirate law, to impregnate his dead brother's wife to raise up seed to his dead brother. This was to protect the dead brother from being disgraced because of being childless.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Moab is my washbasin, upon Edom I toss my sandal; over Philistia I shout in triumph. Psalm 60:8

Kiel and Delitzsch, outstanding Biblical scholars of an earlier generation, speak of the sandal in this manner:

The sandal or the shoe, is an object of treading down, oppressing, and signifies metaphorically, (1) a man that is weak and incapable of defending himself against oppression...²

The removal, carrying and fastening of shoes was the task of the lowest slave in the rich household. This does not explain Psalms 60:8, but it does give an impression of just how low that servant was thought to be.

The meaning of wearing sandals:

- a. It was a symbol of preparedness. In Exodus 12:11, the people of Israel were instructed to eat the Passover with their shoes on, to be ready to travel at a moment's notice.
- b. It was considered a source of beauty for women in the Song of Solomon. The author said it this way,

How beautiful your sandaled feet, O prince's daughter! Your graceful legs are like jewels the work of a craftsman's hands. Song Of Solomon 7:1

- c. In Luke 15:22 it is a symbol of being free rather than being a slave; a symbol of a high degree of wealth as opposed to a very low level of poverty.³

In the story Jesus told, the Prodigal Son asked to be accepted as a servant, to be without shoes. The father paid no attention to that part of the request. He instructed his servants to put sandals on his son's feet, to identify him as rich, not poor; free, not slave; family, not outcast. In fact, the father was giving his son more than a covering for his feet. He was granting him family membership again, for that privilege had been removed when he left home.

Just think of what this brief conversation among the father, son and servants meant to the returning boy. It changed his whole idea about what life was expected to be when he returned. It gave him all that he requested and a whole lot more. It gave him restoration to the family when there was nothing he could do, no matter how wealthy he might become, to reclaim this family status. He was the knowing recipient of grace far beyond the punishment he really deserved.

This is just one more picture which Jesus gave to the inquiring Pharisees of the limitless, astounding love and forgiveness of the Father. It described a level of mercy for which the ambitious religious leaders were ill-prepared. The good news Jesus was trying to live

² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Old Testament In Ten Volumes, Volume 5, Psalms* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) p. 199

³ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol 4*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) pp. 491, 492

SANDALS

and preach took the Pharisees by surprise. They were dealing with the unforgivable, while Jesus was dealing with forgiveness without boundaries.

FATHER

The Prodigal Son said,

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. Luke 15:21

The elder son said,

*Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.
Luke 15:29*

People sometimes overlook the fact that there is a serious difference in the way the two brothers, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, spoke to their father.

Notice that the Prodigal Son addressed him as "father." The elder brother, however, did not address him at all, but simply began his critical, judgmental statement.

To speak as the elder son did was a very serious infraction for a Jew. One of the ten commandments was to "honor your father and your mother." The New Testament speaks of this as the only commandment with promise. To omit the address of respect was a serious offense against his father and the commandment.

If you read carefully the cutting remarks of the elder brother, you notice that he thinks of his obedience as a burden, not a joy. He thought of his efforts as slave labor, not a partnership with his father.

There is irony here. The son who had not committed the grievous, malicious acts was the one who violated the commandment and spoke disrespectfully to his father. You will remember that the whole parable was Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' challenge about why He spoke with tax collectors and sinners. In effect, Jesus was quietly making a comparison between the Pharisees and the elder brother on the one hand and the tax collectors and the Prodigal Son on the other hand. In the process Jesus placed the tax collectors in a better light than the highly respected Pharisees. Certainly that subtle attack did not go unnoticed by the boastful Pharisees.

It may be that Jesus was trying to teach the Pharisees that it is as bad or worse for the self-righteous to gloat over their superiority as it was for the very guilty to behave in an unacceptable manner. The Pharisee was at least as bad as the Prodigal, and perhaps, far worse. Unfortunately, the Pharisee seemed to be the only one who did not know it.

THE PLEADING FATHER

So his father went out and pleaded with him. Luke 15:28b

Often, when people read the story of the Prodigal Son, they think of the older son as just plain stubborn and hard-headed. He was, but there was much more to it than that.

A father pleading with his son is not an unheard-of phenomenon in our culture. Go to any supermarket or restaurant and you are very apt to hear one or more parents pleading with their son or daughter to eat, or stop tearing packages open on the shelves, or running up and down the aisles. That was not the case in Israel during the first century. A father was to be treated with awesome respect. Anything less than this would expose a person to the wrath of the father, that of the family, even the community. The father whom Jesus portrayed was clearly worthy of the deepest respect. A father should only need to send word to his son and it would be obeyed. In this instance, the father left the party, which he should not have had to do, to plead with his son, which was even more unthinkable in that culture. If this was not humiliation enough, the father returned without gaining his desire that the older son enter the feast and thus forgive the younger brother. To plead with his son was an unthinkable, scandalous disgrace. To have his belligerent son refuse his pleading request would be the epitome of shame.

The father was saying that he had forgiven the prodigal and the feast was to inform the entire community so that they would also receive him. The father was saying, "I have forgiven your brother and I expect you to do the same." The eldest son was refusing the instructions of his father.

The father knew that he was risking everything in order to reach out to his wayward elder son. The community would probably fail to understand this expression of mercy. They would want justice and they would want the boy punished severely. There were at least two reasons for this feeling:

1. The father could expect that his sons would obey his wishes as long as he lived. In this instance, neither son offered that to their father. This would cause the people to think of him as an incompetent father.
2. Because the father had forgiven the younger son and welcomed him back into the family, the older brother was guilty of disobedience of his own by refusing to offer the same forgiveness which his father had extended to the younger brother.

Jesus' portrayal of the elder son also being wrong would confuse the people of that day. In their eyes, the younger son would not have been obeying the rules set forth in the culture concerning the inheritance. They had rules and customs that must be observed. They would tend to agree with the elder brother that he had been slighted in favor of an errant younger brother. These people had little compassion on those who would violate their code.

Repeatedly, throughout the whole parable, the life of the father is spotlighted because he expressed great love in the face of abuse, and that by his own son.

The words with which the father pleaded with his elder son are very important:

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

'My son' the father said, 'You are always with me, and everything I have is yours, but we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' Luke 15:31, 32

A willingness on the part of the elder brother to forgive his erring brother and attend the celebration of forgiveness, which the father had decided to give his younger son, would in no way do harm to the elder brother's prestige or position in the family. He would not be impoverished by his father's generosity to the wayward younger brother.

Quickly, the father explained his actions to his son - a move that should not have been necessary; one that would have been frowned upon by the community. He expressed the mood of his actions when he said, "...but we had to..." Why did he have to celebrate? It was because this was the way they could express the kind of forgiveness that welcomed an errant son back into the family; this was the way a child considered dead came to be accepted as alive again.

By the same token, the respect for parents was a legal requirement of the Jews, especially the Pharisees. In a very subtle way, Jesus points out the lack of respect on the part of the elder son.

Notice in Luke 15:18, that when the younger, erring son approached his father, he used the respectful address, "father," which every decent son used. Notice in Luke 15:31, the father addresses his elder son and heir, as "my son." Both the errant son and the father took the time, in the midst of the heated situation, to be respectful when they spoke. The elder son, however, was too angry for respect. He did not address his father with the respect the wandering son afforded his father. He simply started to challenge his father without the respectful address, "father."

The father was indeed the head of the house. This had a much deeper meaning and attendant implications for them than it does for us. The father identified for his elder son that a decision had been made to welcome the erring boy back into the family. The father made this announcement in at least two ways:

1. He celebrated a feast which symbolized forgiveness on behalf of the wandering boy.
2. In Luke 15:27, the father said, "your brother." Since the younger brother had asked for his inheritance and left home, the father would not have allowed anyone to speak of this young man as his "son." Now the father announces that the boy is his older son's "brother."

The elder son did not want to hear about the unpopular decision that his father had made. He acted as though the father had not spoken. Notice the sequence of their statements:

1. Luke 15:27 - The father said, "**Your brother** has come."
2. Luke 15:30 - The elder son said, "When **this son of yours...**"
3. Luke 15:32 - the father said, "Because **this brother of yours...**"

Without rancor or hostility, the father quietly corrects the angry, elder son in such a way that he would hear him, but would not be publicly humiliated.

Jesus' message was twofold:

THE PLEADING FATHER

1. As in the other two parables in this chapter, Jesus is portraying the limitlessness of the mercy of God. This is awesome!
2. In very subtle, but very forceful terms, Jesus is describing the anger and rigidity of the Pharisees who wanted to seem so pious when in reality they were as sinful as anyone else.

The vividness of Jesus' picture is so strong that once you begin to feel with the people in the story, you can never again feel superior to those who fail.

The emphasis, in this instance, is on the pleading of the father. This is a very graphic picture of the deep desire of God to have His erring, wandering children return to His home. This prevenient grace¹ is the gift which God's Spirit searches after us to offer to those who will receive it. This is grace which God extends to all who rebel against Him and deserve only punishment. Again, Jesus was answering questions about why He spent time with tax collectors and prostitutes. His answer was that the mercy and prevenient grace of God demanded it.

¹ Prevenient grace is that grace by which God searches after us, by His Spirit, from before the time of our birth until we ultimately respond to His overtures of mercy and seek His forgiveness. At this point, the Prodigal has come home and father has received his son who had been considered dead.

THE SON'S REFUSAL

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him.' Luke 15:28-30

This is also part of the parable of the Prodigal Son. In this instance, the parable might be better named "the prodigal sons".

Many sermons have been preached about the stubborn, pouting, angry, elder brother. To be certain, there is an element of truth in these suggestions. There is far more, however, in this part of the parable than the emotional immaturity of the elder son.

As Jesus told the story, the people who listened would have been outraged. Their anger would have bordered on being out of control. This is just a story, but even in stories they observed the rules of decency. In that culture, the father of the household had ultimate power and control in the family. Jews were particularly fond of the commandment to honor their father and mother. It meant to give them respect. It meant to obey the father's command without failure or hesitation. To disobey one's father, and publicly at that, was to jeopardize one's relationship with God, embarrass and humiliate the father publicly and expose one's self to public scorn and possible injury.

The elder son refused to go in and take part in the feast celebrating the return of his brother. The father humiliated himself by pleading with his elder son to come and take part in the celebration of restoration, but to no avail. The heir of the man's household refused to enter the feast.

It was not just rebellion that kept the son from entering the feast, though it is obvious that he was rebellious. The elder son's seething anger was not the only thing prohibiting him from going into the house to celebrate his brother's return, though he was obviously angry and the text states as much. He refused to even call the boy his brother, choosing to refer defiantly to him as "your son." There was some obvious selfishness present when the elder brother bitterly reminded his father that though he had killed the fattened calf for his disowned brother, the father had never even given him a baby goat, which was worth much less, to celebrate with his friends. But it was not his selfishness that kept the elder son from entering the house to share in the celebration. It was his integrity. You will remember that there are at least four ways for Jews to show their forgiveness:

1. Some say that "the kiss" is a sign of forgiveness and acceptance.
2. One could express forgiveness by sharing salt with the guilty.
3. One could offer forgiveness by carrying the guilty into your home.
4. Finally one could offer forgiveness most vividly by eating with the guilty party.

This is the reason why the Pharisees got upset when Jesus accepted Zacchaeus' hospitality and ate with him. The Pharisees thought that publicans or tax collectors were unforgivable. Jesus gave Zacchaeus the sign of forgiveness. Just to touch this tax collector or

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

anything that he touched made a person unclean, but Jesus forgave Zacchaeus what the Pharisees considered both treason and immorality.

If you reflect on the parable, the father offered his returning son every one of the symbols of forgiveness! He wanted his son to understand that there was absolutely no doubt about his forgiveness and restoration to the family.

The elder son was different. He did not forgive his wayward brother. He had disowned his younger brother and his use of the designation "your son" rather than "my brother," as the father insisted, made it clear that he was not going to forgive and restore his brother.

If the elder brother had gone into the house, everyone, including his father and disowned brother, would have understood that he was forgiving and restoring his brother. That was not true and he was not about to give that impression.

If the elder brother had entered his father's house, decency would require that he eat some of the food or publicly shame his father, because as the elder son he was supposed to be the leader of such a celebration. The elder brother refused that responsibility and even refused to attend. This was yet another public humiliation for the father. But if the elder brother ate one bite of the food at this celebration, he would be demonstrating two symbols of forgiveness:

1. Eating food with the guilty person.
2. Sharing salt with the rejected one.

For the elder brother, neither of these ideas were true. He wanted it to be clear that he was not forgiving his brother.

Finally, if the elder son had entered his father's house, he would have been required to greet the honored guest, his wayward brother, with a kiss. This too would have symbolized acceptance and he was not about to give any hint of forgiveness or restoration.

Remember, these three parables were given in response to the question asked of Jesus concerning His spending time with the filth, the outcasts of society. In three parables, Jesus was responding that He spent time with the outcasts because they were ultimately important to and forgivable by the Father.

In the parable of the Prodigal Sons, Jesus was clearly describing the attitude and actions of the arrogant Pharisees rather than the publicans and sinners with whom He associated.

Reflect again on this parable. Have you ever, in your life, seen such a description of the love and forgiveness of God as you find here?

AN ISSUE OF BLOOD

And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, 'If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.' Mark 5:25-28

Each one of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, tell this story. Mark, however, gives the most complete account.

The text is not clear concerning the exact nature of her ailment. Some authorities suggest that it was a uterine abnormality of some sort. It could well have been a malfunction of the menstrual cycle. We cannot be specific.

Modern Americans have some difficulty understanding this kind of situation. There is so much expertise available to us that many feel that every physical ailment can be cured. Obviously, this is not true. It does, however, give one an impression of the modern mind-set.

Unfortunately for the people of that day, their medical professionals knew far less than our physicians today. There were two levels of care available at that time. They had a number of carefully trained doctors, such as Dr. Luke. The care this woman had received had been, for the most part, from some of the most skillful physicians available in that day.

There were also practitioners of magic and home remedies, much like the witch doctors of Africa. William Barclay relates information from the Talmud, a Jewish commentary on the Mishnah, which was a philosophical code by which the Jews lived:

The Talmud itself gives no fewer than eleven cures for such trouble. Some of them are tonics and astringents; but some of them are sheer superstitions like carrying the ashes of an ostrich-egg in a linen rag in summer and a cotton rag in winter; or carrying a barley corn which had been found in the dung of a white she-ass.¹

It would be most surprising if this woman had not gone to many of both kinds of practitioners. There is no way to be certain.

We do not know when it first started, but ancient medical research believed that with the diseased, at least part of the problem lay in the blood. They reasoned that if you cut the patient and let some of the blood drain away, this would let out some of the infection and disease, the patient should be on the road to recovery. This theory was practiced even in the early days of the eighteenth century. Our first President, George Washington, received this kind of treatment.

In the case of the woman who came to Jesus, she already had a problem with blood loss, but as happens so often, people try to use a procedure to cure most everything. Such was the case with this woman who came to Jesus. The predictable result was that the per-

¹ William Barclay's, *The Gospel Of Mark*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975) p. 129

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

petual tiredness and weakness which accompanies blood loss was seriously intensified when the doctors tried to get rid of whatever it was they thought was in the blood. Dr. Luke was understandably more reticent than Mark in his description of the woman's care and the resulting conditions.

Mark says it this way:

She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. Mark 5:26

That should not surprise us at all. Take an anemic person, increase their blood loss and the anemic condition will be seriously intensified.

You gain some impression of the frustration that she and her family must have experienced by the fact that she did not just go to one doctor. She went to several doctors, over many years. She used up all the money they had and the net result was that she was worse than she had been in the first place. Obviously, the husband was a caring person. He could have just let her gradually decline and die. He did not. He apparently risked everything he had in order to try to get help for her. I must add that some scholars believe that her husband had divorced her and left her on her own. This grows out of the way Mark speaks of the finances:

*...and had spent all that **she had**... Mark 5:26b*

Of course, this can neither be verified nor denied.

There are several implications to such a disorder. This was particularly true among the Jews. The Scriptures speak to conditions of this general nature in Leviticus 15:

When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge just as in the days of her period. Leviticus 15:25

Anything that this woman touched or that touched her was unclean. She was barred from entering the place of worship during the entirety of that time. This means that the woman had been a spiritual outcast for twelve years. Imagine being in that situation!

The text does not say so, but we might assume that she was married. If that were the case, her husband would be presented a most difficult situation. He would have to decide whether to have the opportunity of worship or to have some dealings with his wife. If he touched her or anything she had touched, he would be unclean and unable to go to the temple. It would mean that she could not bring water from the well for him; she could not buy food for him nor fix any meal for him. He probably could not stay in the same house with her and still be able to go to the temple for worship.

If she had a son, it would mean that he could not touch anything she had touched or be touched by her and still be able to prepare for his bar-mitzvah. If he had gone through the years of training for this event, he would not be able to go to touch the scroll of the Law or read from it at his own bar-mitzvah.

AN ISSUE OF BLOOD

The woman would be held in suspicion by the entire community because her illness would be considered a judgment from God. This would be a large part of the reason for the avoidance by all of them.

There were many serious, social implications as well. Her husband would be avoided by the entire community. If she had an issue of blood for twelve years, that meant that there could be no intimate relationships during that time and no children born. This would automatically cause suspicion among the people in the community. They seriously believed that any couple which did not have children regularly experienced the judgment of God. The community would avoid the husband lest they too be judged. The husband could have no standing in the community and it would seriously hamper his ability to make a living for his family. The husband and children would have to draw the water because the wife would not be welcomed at the village well. The husband and children would have to do the buying, because the merchants would not do business with a woman who was unclean.

The fact that she had been in this condition for twelve years was a very important piece of information about the situation. If you look at Genesis 16:6, 16:16 and 17:1, it is clear that Abraham and Sarah were more than thirteen years in the land without bearing a child. They believed that a man had grounds for divorce if his wife was barren for a period of ten years. The people of Israel, in the time of Jesus, would have been familiar with this information. The fact that this woman had this bleeding condition for twelve years meant that her husband had solid legal grounds for a divorce without anyone in the community thinking less of him for it.

Think for a moment what this meant to the woman herself. Because she was unclean, she could not go to the marketplace to buy food and talk with the other women. She could not visit at the well with the other women because they avoided her due to her situation. In her home, in the temple, in the community - at every turn this woman was ostracized completely. She had to be more lonely than the lepers. At least the lepers had each other; she had no one.

The text does not so indicate, but if she had children, it would be almost as difficult for them. They could not play with other children. The same motive that would cause other women to ostracize the woman would cause these same women to prohibit their children from playing with the children of the woman with the issue of blood.

The children of this woman would not be able to go to the synagogue to learn or to worship because just living in the same house with the sick woman would render them unclean as well.

If the woman had a son, he could not prepare for or attend his own bar-mitzvah and was approaching the age of marriage, families would be loath to arrange for a wedding between their child and the child of a woman they considered to be under the curse of God.

It is interesting that Jesus called the woman "daughter." This is used in a spiritual sense. Jesus was offering her acceptance and belonging when wherever else she looked, she found only rejection and ostracism.

There was an understanding in that day about the *Tsitsit*, or fringe, on the garment which the men wore. This could only be touched by a member of a man's family. Either the woman was a member of Jesus' family or else by calling her "daughter" he was providing a gracious way for her not to experience even greater grief from the people of the community. I prefer the latter understanding.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Jesus exhorted the woman to "go in peace." The word "peace," in this instance, does not mean just an absence of war. It suggests the idea of wholeness. For the life that was broken in every way one could possibly imagine, Jesus offers a sense of wholeness she had not experienced in more than a decade. Only God could imagine the joy and sense of acceptance that she experienced in the healing and affirmation of Jesus.

THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way" -"a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Mark 1:1-3

We will not ask for a show of hands, but it would be interesting to see just how many have read these verses many times and thought of them as just a poetic, graphic way to speak of the coming of Jesus. I must confess that I had those very thoughts. I did not take the verses seriously, but thought of them as a picturesque way of saying that the coming of Jesus was very important.

Only Matthew and Mark include this rich insight into the life and ministry of Jesus. It appears that Mark gives us a more comprehensive report on this issue.

Notice, at the beginning of verse two, Mark said, "it is written in Isaiah the prophet." He begins immediately, however, to quote from Malachi. It is only in verse three that Mark quotes from Isaiah. It appears that he may have done this in order to capture the attention of Jewish people who held Isaiah in great respect. It may also be a way of pointing out that though he quoted from Malachi, the quotation from Isaiah was really the point of the whole presentation. As we indicate elsewhere, authors in Scripture often gave two or three Biblical quotations in order to present an open and shut case to those who heard them.

Both Mark and Matthew describe a royal procession that the people of that time and place had seen many times before. Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 identify their prophetic message with the Messiah. Matthew and Mark further indicate the name of the person identified as the herald, in the quotations from Malachi and Isaiah, to be John the Baptist.

Look with me at these two quotations from the Old Testament.

'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come' says the Lord Almighty. Malachi 3:1

The word "messenger", "malak" in Hebrew, had a number of meanings. It could be a message bearer, a courtier, or a retainer sent for other purposes, such as the encouragement of trade or the arrangement of mutual defense. In I Samuel 6:21, messengers, malakim, were sent to announce to the people of Kiriath Jearim that the Philistines had returned the Ark. Many other duties were gathered under this heading.¹

In this passage, the "messenger" was a herald. Whenever the king travelled, a "messenger" was sent ahead of him on foot. He announced to all the approach of the king. He made sure that everyone knew that the king was coming so that they could make the necessary preparation; so that there would be no interruptions or untoward events to mar the king's passage.

¹ R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament Volume 1*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) p. 465

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

In this country, when the president is going to be in a certain place, a contingent of FBI agents goes into the area beforehand to make the necessary security arrangements and prepare everything so that the president's trip would be without interruptions or unpleasant situations.

In most of that part of the world, few roads were built, except in a city. The Roman Empire championed the idea of building roads on a grand scale. In most places, roads developed as people, animals and vehicles travelled in a common direction. These roads were not smooth and even. The rainy season also brought severe ruts and depressions all along the way.

It was important that a king travel in comfort. In order to accomplish this, servants were sent ahead of the king and his entourage to smooth out the bumps and ruts in the road and make it as comfortable for him as possible.

This is what Malachi was talking about when he prophesied,

'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.' Malachi 3:1a

Every Jew who read Mark's opening quotation would immediately understand this word picture of servants smoothing out the road for a king to travel.

Malachi accomplished two things in this prophetic message:

1. He made a clear statement about the Messiah's coming.
2. He provided a vivid picture of the fact that the Messiah was a royal personage.

Mark used this presentation in such a way as to take full advantage of both expressions.

We need to remember the circumstances in which Malachi wrote. The priests of Israel were becoming slack about their service before the altar. They offered sacrifices that were lame and not fit for the sacrifice. They took their responsibilities casually, forgetting what they were expected to do before the Lord. Malachi was saying that God would send a messenger to clean up the worship of His people before the Messiah came. It was more a threat to Israel than a promise.

The prophetic message, as quoted by Mark, identifies Jesus as a most unique, unusual person. No average citizen of Israel had servants "going before him" as he travelled the rut filled roads of Israel. No average citizen had a procession in order to go to the corner store.

When I take a trip, no one "goes before me" except the people in the car ahead of me. When I decide to go to the store, no one, including the store clerks, knows that I am coming. It makes no difference to anyone else if I go to the store, the bank, the church or lumber yard. It makes no impression on anyone if you or I go to town, but it was different with royalty.

On what we call "Palm Sunday", centuries ago, this scenario was carried out. Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, as a king would ride when he comes in peace.

As Jesus rode toward Jerusalem, people placed palm branches and items of clothing on the road ahead of Him to smooth out the way. It was clear to them that they were acknowledging Jesus as their king. They wanted their king to ride in comfort and majesty.

THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

As Mark quoted the prophet,

'I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way..' Mark 1:2

The second quotation Mark included is from Isaiah 40:3. The prophet said,

A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, and every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain...' Isaiah 40:3, 4

This quotation describes the smoothing of the road more graphically than does Malachi. Isaiah also describes the work of the servant who "calls out".

When the king travelled, servants went ahead of the entourage and smoothed out the road. When they came to a hill, these servants would level it out. When they encountered a depression in the road, it would be filled up.

When they came to a populated area, another servant went ahead of the king and his escorts and heralded their coming. He cried out so that everyone could hear, to inform the people that the king was coming.

Mark is affirming that John the Baptist is the one who filled that capacity completely. If you read his sermons carefully, you will note that he was paving the way for Jesus to begin His preaching ministry. John the Baptist was not looking for a way to make himself known. He looked for a way to make Jesus known.

The identification of John the Baptist as the servant who smoothed out the road for the king or the servant who heralded the coming of the king was a deliberate way to impress on anyone who listened that Jesus was in fact the king, the Messiah.

WALK THROUGH THE LAND

*Go walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.
Genesis 13:17*

I must admit that this whole process escaped me for quite some time. It seemed to me that this was just something God told Abraham to do, but it apparently had no other significance behind it. It seemed like it was just one more quaint saying that we often found in the King James Version. Only later did I discover that was not the case.

There are specific steps through which a person in our culture must go in order to secure a piece of property. They are usually as follows:

1. Find the owner and agree on a price.
2. Draw up and sign a sales agreement.
3. Do a survey of the land.
4. Do a title search and secure insurance.
5. Sign the contract.
6. The closing - an exchange of signatures, money and documents. It is possible to purchase land without all these steps, but people usually do so at great risk.

In ancient times, the process was somewhat similar, but there were some differences.

1. Inquire concerning the ownership, if not known.
2. Meet at the city gate with the Elders, to negotiate the terms of sale.
3. Agree on terms in the presence of the Elders.
4. Give an earnest - a small amount of dirt was taken from the land, placed in a leather pouch and given to the purchaser.
5. The exchange of money.
6. An official walk through the land - this is to verify that it is in fact the property that you want to buy, and to announce to everyone that there is a new owner.
7. The ownership has now changed hands.

Look carefully at Luke chapter 14. Here, Jesus is telling the Parable of the Great Banquet. He said,

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought as field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Luke 14:18

There can be no doubt that the responses of the invited guests were exactly what Jesus called them, "excuses." We must also understand, however, that the excuses represent things that the people who listened to Jesus would understand. John Peter Lange, a German Biblical scholar of an earlier generation, speaks of this particular excuse in these terms:

Whoever finds it unreasonable that the yet unviewed field was already bought, need not hesitate to conceive the matter thus: That the purchase was not yet un-

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

conditionally concluded, and that at this very moment it depended on the viewing whether he should become definitive possessor of it.¹

The process which the man called "go and see it" is exactly what God was telling Abraham to do in Genesis 13. Notice what God said to Abraham:

*Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.
Genesis 13:17*

Abraham and Lot had just had intense words about their relationship and proximity to each other. Abraham was generous and invited Lot to take whatever land he would and Abraham would take what was left. Lot, shockingly, chose the very best land, around Sodom and Gomorrah, and left the barren wilderness for Abraham.

God was telling Abraham that he would not be abandoned because of this unkind gesture by Lot. God was going to give Abraham all the land that he could see in all four directions. It was going to belong to Abraham and God wanted him to do two things:

1. Walk through the land and inspect it. See what it is that I am giving you.
2. Go through the land and demonstrate to all that this has become your land.

Land ownership was not transferred when the agreement was made and the money paid. The transfer took place after these necessities had been concluded and the new owner walked through the length and breadth of the land to demonstrate his ownership.

If you study the entry of Israel into Canaan, you will see that God told them to go in and possess the land. It meant that they must go all through the land and demonstrate that the land in fact belonged to them. They did not want to do that. They moved in and settled down. They did everything possible to avoid conflict with the people who already lived in the land. Consequently, the people did not get the impression that these people in fact had taken ownership of the land, but that they were interlopers.

The point of "walking through the land," was not just to become familiar with what it was like, as some have thought. It was also to demonstrate ownership and complete the legal transaction. God said that this land was to belong to Abraham. God wanted that to be clear to others as well.

¹ John Peter Lange, *Commentary On The Holy Scriptures, Luke*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House) p. 227

"PRUNING" MEANS "LIFTING"

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. John 15:2

Did it ever bother you to hear a sermon on this passage? It really bothered me for many years. The pastor would preach about the lack of fruit-bearing and then talk about how God deals with that situation by "pruning." I could just visualize God taking the trimming shears to my spiritual life. I was drawn to the passage, but repulsed by a misunderstanding of the imagery.

We need to remember the situation in which John 15:2 is found. This is the only place in the Gospels where the message of the vine and the branches is presented. Jesus had predicted His death and the disciples' denial of Him. They were distraught by this announcement and Jesus comforted them, promising to send the Holy Spirit in His absence. It is at this point that Jesus spoke of the vine and the branches, of spiritual growth by obedience and by dwelling in Him.

I thought I could get some help by studying the passage in the Greek. I looked up the word "prune" and discovered that the word was "kathairei." It is the source of our English word "catharsis," which means to purge or purify. This piece of information confused me. How does one cleanse a vine? I struggled with this verse for years, but on my first trip to Israel I gained an insight.

Most of us have seen grape vines growing in America. These vines characteristically grow in rows about four or five feet apart. The plants grow to a height of three to four feet and travel along a wire strung between cedar poles. That is excellent in areas where there is sufficient rainfall. However, Israel has very little rainfall. The area has very hot days and extremely cold nights, creating conditions very conducive to the formation of dew.

It may seem unusual to us, but in Biblical times, grapevines grew along the ground much like pumpkin vines. To facilitate the growth of grapes, a rock was placed beside the main stem of the grape vine. When dew formed on the rock, it watered the plant. If a plant touched the ground at the place where a bunch of grapes should grow, no grapes would be formed. The vine would probably mildew, and certainly would not produce grapes. A vineyard keeper watched for this situation. When the problem began to develop, the keeper **lifted up** the vine, at this point, and placed a rock under it. This lifted the branch off the ground and inhibited the formation of mildew. Grapes then could grow.

After actually having seen this procedure in Israel, I looked at the Greek again and realized that I had studied only half of the verse. A good translation of the Greek might be, "he **lifts up** every branch in me that bears no fruit." The Greek word "airei" literally means "to lift up, to raise or to suspend." This affects our view of how God deals with us. It isn't as though God has a new pair of clippers and just watches for a chance to snip us off. He watches for our difficulty and lifts us up to enable us to achieve His will for our lives. That is shouting material!

Again I looked at the verse in the Greek. Suddenly the second part of the verse also made sense when some childhood experiences came to mind. I had grown up in an area where there were many orchards and also some vineyards. Each year the trees were pruned in a way that seemed severe to me. Because it bothered me so much, I asked about it. The growers told me that they trimmed back the trees so that the energy of the plant

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

would go into the production of fruit rather than the production of longer branches. It was only at this point that the use of the word "kathairei" made sense to me. Jesus was not saying that the vinedresser trimmed away the parts of the plant where mildew had formed. He was saying that the grower lifted the mildewed part of the plant off the ground so that growth could take place. Only then would abundant growth occur. The pruning took place only in parts of the plant that would not produce fruit.

Think about this in terms of your spiritual growth. I suspect that there have been times in your spiritual life when you were not producing fruit at all; other times when the yield was a bit slim. In John 15:2, Jesus was giving direction for these times in our lives.

When spiritual growth ceases to exist, Jesus does not scold or punish; He **"lifts us up"** so that we can grow in His likeness. There are also times when our spiritual growth is sluggish. God uses these times to trim away the things in our lives that hinder our growth and divert our attention from Him. I had learned quite a bit about grape vines, but I learned much more about my own spiritual growth. God lifted me up to protect me from conditions that would stunt my spiritual growth. On other occasions, in His great wisdom, He trimmed away the false growth that hindered real spiritual growth from taking place. I must say, there were times when I wondered if He had not trimmed away too much, too harshly. It is only as I look back at my spiritual journey that I can see how wise and gracious He really was to me.

BALDNESS BETWEEN THE EYES

You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession. Deuteronomy 14:1, 2

A more literal version of the Hebrew text, from which our Bible was translated, is more specific.

You are sons of Jehovah your God. You shall not cut yourselves and shall not put any baldness between your eyes for the dead, for you are a holy people to Jehovah your God and Jehovah has chosen you to be a people to him, a special treasure out of all the people on the face of the earth. Deuteronomy 14:1, 2

Moses begins the message by reminding the people of who they are. They are "sons of Jehovah your God." To be a son involved several understandings. The context clearly indicates that "son" is not used here as a male identifier. It identified the whole people. It was also used here to include some information which was culturally significant. In that culture, to be a son was to be an heir. It also suggested the passing on of certain personal characteristics. This is the idea of which Jesus spoke in the Gospel of John:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. John 8:44

Jesus was not saying that Satan fathered these people, but that they bore his character and characteristics. Being a son involved the emulation of lifestyle and personality. Many will remember hearing some older people speak of a child's actions being like the parent's by saying, "an apple never falls far from the tree."

When Moses speaks to them as being "sons of the Lord your God," this was more than a way of identifying deity. In Hebrew it is "Jehovah your eloheyka." "Jehovah" is the name for God which stresses His judgment while "eloheyka" stresses His eternal mercy.

Moses said that Israel was "holy." In this he was identifying all other nations as "unholy." We tend to associate "holy" with "pure." It is that, but it is more. To be "holy" has to do with purpose. And here the purpose was that they were set apart from all the nations to serve God.

Israel was a special treasure "out of all the people on the face of the earth." God loved every nation, but out of all these nations Israel enjoyed a relationship with God which was special and unique.

Because these things are true, there are some special situations which must be observed. As Moses will identify later in the chapter, this uniqueness will have a direct effect on their dietary choices. It will have an impact on the way they live their lives and respond to life situations. Shaving the forehead is a case in point.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

At the time Moses said these words, Israel was poised on the east side of the Jordan, at Pizgah. They were about to cross over into the Land of Promise which was inhabited by Canaanites.

These Canaanites were idolatrous people and participated in some brutal pagan practices in the name of their deities. One of those had to do with the death of a relative or close friend. Their mourning was intense. They would cut their forehead and rub ashes into the incision to produce "proud flesh." This was somewhat like the "rites of passage" observed in parts of Africa where a child received "beauty marks" to indicate the onset of adulthood. These "marks" also identified a person as a devotee of the idol in whose honor the characteristic "marking" or "shaving" was performed.

The Canaanites also shaved off their eyebrows as part of this religious mourning of personal loss.¹ Though their actions had definite idolatrous overtones, it was a bit like the more modest practice in some countries of wearing special clothing for the rest of their life, or in other countries where they wear special clothing for one year following the death of one's spouse.

Some have used this passage to teach that people should not pluck their eyebrows. That was not Moses' intent. He was saying that Israel was considered as God's family, a special people. If they were to be a witness to the other nations of the world, then they must not accept any practice which affirms the existence of any other god. They must abstain from any hint of pagan practice, for they are "sons of the Lord their God."

¹ Philip Schaff, Ed., *Lange's Commentary On The Holy Scriptures*, Deuteronomy, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House) p. 131

CAST THE FIRST STONE

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.'
John 8:7

From early childhood I remember sermons preached on this passage, telling me that Jesus was challenging the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, almost daring them to stone the guilty woman.

There is something of that nature in the text, but there is more-- much more.

According to the Old Testament law, witnesses did more than tell what they had "seen and heard." Having given the testimony that convicted the guilty person, the witnesses were required to throw the first stones, to carry out the mandatory sentence of death by stoning. Following this, the whole community was required to take part in the stoning.

There was a good reason for this. The witness must throw his stone with the convicted person and the whole community looking on. It did a great deal to sharpen the witness' memory and help him to tell the whole truth.

The entire community was required to take part in the stoning. It was hoped that their participation and viewing of the punishment would impress upon them the intense gravity of the particular sin for which this person was being stoned.

The law in question here is stated in Deuteronomy:

The hands of the witnesses must be first in putting to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge evil from among you. Deuteronomy 17:7

In the Gospel of John, there is a picture of such an experience in Jerusalem. We should be reminded that this experience is not recorded in the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Further, the very best manuscripts do not include it in the Gospel of John. There are some manuscripts, however, in which it is recorded.

Notice what the author wrote:

When they kept questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' *John 8:7*

Jesus was in the courts of the temple at Jerusalem (v.2). A woman was brought to Jesus by the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. They accused the woman of being taken in the act of adultery. There is no mention of her denial of this accusation.

It would be easy to overlook some information these details provide for us. If this woman was taken in the act of adultery, then she was unclean and those who brought her to the temple were unclean. In that case, neither the woman nor her accusers were permitted to be in the temple. No unclean person was permitted to enter the temple compound.

Chefetz Chayim, a noted Hebrew scholar, discussed this law in these terms:

For Scripture says, 'If there is among you any man who is not clean...he shall not come within the camp' (D'varim 23:11) and the Sages of blessed memory re-

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

ceived the teaching... that this means the 'camp of the Levites,' which is the Temple mount..¹

We need to remember that the accusers did not come seeking truth or light. They had more expertise in the Law than anyone else in Jerusalem. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were enemies of Jesus. They did not come out of great love for the Law, for they were using the Law to serve their own purposes, rather than being servants of the Law. These Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were not only experts in the interpretation of the Law, but men who relished being known as the holiest people in the realm. It was they who brought the woman to Jesus, seeking to trap Him with His own words.

As you read the passage in John 8 again, notice that he says that they kept on questioning Jesus. It was a way to intensify the pressure, in the hope that He would say something they could use against Him.

They used an ingenious method in trying to put Jesus on the spot. They asked if this obviously guilty woman should be stoned. It seemed simple enough, but it was a clever trap. If Jesus said they should stone her, then it would contradict His consistent teaching of forgiveness for all. On the other hand, if He gave the verdict to release the woman from stoning, which they hoped He would do, then they could charge Him with violating the Law of Moses. They were convinced they could do away with Jesus whichever way He responded.

Jesus did not defend her error. He affirmed the Law of Moses both by His words and His actions. He very quietly taught His enemies a lesson. He put **them** on the spot. If they refused to throw the stones, they would be guilty of rejecting the Law, rejecting the prescribed punishment for a bona-fide crime and rejecting their personal responsibility to participate in the judgment as the people of God.

On the other hand, if they threw the stones, they would be claiming sinlessness, and they knew that the people who watched could make a long list of their trespasses.

Jesus wrote in the sand as they thought over their dilemma and the guilty woman worried.

The text says that the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law went away. This was a culture where age was treated with deference and respect. When Jesus' enemies went away, the eldest left first and then in succession down to the youngest. They all went away. Apparently they felt the only way for them to save face was to walk away.

In so doing, however, they rejected the Law; they rejected the punishment for sin prescribed in the Law; they rejected their personal responsibility to uphold the Law by carrying out its mandate of throwing the first stones.

It seems clear that the woman was guilty, but there were no accusers, for they **all** left. John 8:4 says she was taken in the very act of adultery. There was no one present who could witness that they had seen the crime, thus the law required that she go free.

There might be some who would hold that Jesus took a soft position against a terrible sin. That is not the case. Jesus would hold that adultery was as horrible a sin as the arrogance, deceit and pride of the Pharisees. In His mind, there were no shades of sin. Every sin was evil, tragic and worthy of punishment. He instructed the woman not to sin again.

¹ Chefetz Chayim, *The Concise Book Of Mitzvoth*, (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1990) p. 273

CAST THE FIRST STONE

The issue the Pharisees brought was: "How can we trap Jesus?" The issue Jesus dealt with was: "There is no difference between the adultery of this woman and the presumption, pride, deceit and abuse of the Pharisees."

The text does not say, but I would suspect that as the Pharisees went away one by one, the crowds who stood by, cheered.

LOWERING FOOD IN A SHEET

He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. Acts 10:11

Did you ever wonder about this passage? I have! For years I visualized a huge bed sheet being let down on the roof of this house. That satisfied my curiosity for some time. On one occasion I thought carefully about the story. I wondered, where did they get sheets when they did not sleep in beds? Now I had a problem to study. I puzzled over this for a long time before I gained any insights.

From 35 - 75 A.D., the early church really struggled. The established Jewish religious leaders were bent on destroying this spiritual movement we call "the church." The Roman authorities were increasingly antagonistic toward the Christians. The Romans began to see Christians as traitors because they would not make an incense offering to the emperor.

Within the church, there were two other struggles:

1. Heresies and other false teachings were creeping in. This was extremely divisive.
2. The whole issue of Gentile believers was beginning to divide the church into two groups.

The church was largely Jewish, but there were already some Gentile believers - e.g., the Ethiopian eunuch and now Cornelius, the Roman Centurion. This whole issue would come to a head at the Jerusalem Council as reported in Acts 15:13, but that had not taken place as yet.

Acts 10 tells us that God sent Cornelius to Peter. Cornelius was a Roman, most likely of the noble Corneli family. He was probably not a Jewish proselyte, but he may have affiliated himself with a group which was committed to Judaism at a lower level called "the Proselytes of the gate." He was a Centurion of the Italian Cohort at Caesarea. Acts 10:31 shows us he was well-known among the Jews because of his gifts to the Jewish poor and was highly respected by them as well. He had to be an unusual man for the Jews to respect him.

Cornelius was very important to the early church because he appears to be one of the first Gentiles upon whom the Scriptures tell us that the Holy Spirit came.

Peter was the houseguest of Simon the Tanner, whose house was by the sea in Joppa. Peter was on the rooftop in prayer when he had a vision. In this vision, he saw the heavens opened and a huge vessel like a sheet was let down by the four corners. Peter saw every possible kind of clean and unclean animal and creeping thing. Three times, a voice from heaven instructed him to "kill and eat."

To say the least, Peter was shocked and stunned. He was deeply concerned about these persistent, heavenly instructions because no strict Jew would ever consider eating the flesh of an unclean animal. His initial response was revulsion and refusal. It bothered him that the voice came again and again.

Remember, Peter is a houseguest in the home of Simon the **tanner**. Simon was probably a Jew, but he lived with severe restrictions. In his work as a tanner, he would constantly come in contact with dead carcasses. This would make him unclean all the time. He was probably always forbidden to come to worship. It shows a remarkable change in

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Peter to be willing to stay in the home of an unclean person without severe frustration on his part. Peter was very strict and would do whatever necessary in order to preserve his ceremonial cleanliness.

A servant of Cornelius came to Simon the Tanner's house asking for Simon Peter. God instructed Peter to go with this Gentile. Whatever else may be said, Peter was obedient. He invited this Gentile to be his houseguest in Simon's house. The next day they went to Caesarea. Peter confessed to his earlier prejudice and told how God had instructed him concerning the equality of peoples in the sight of God. That day, Cornelius became a Christian and the Holy Spirit came upon him. Peter saw what God had been showing him in his dream. Just as God instructed Peter to not think of the animals He had created as unclean, so he should not think of a non-jewish person as unclean either.

Remember, the text says that Peter was in Joppa. The city of Joppa is on the Mediterranean coast, about 30 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Unger, a well known biblical scholar of a former generation, speaks of the city in these terms:

Its harbor naturally made it the port of Jerusalem... Here Jonah embarked for Tarshish. ¹

In our text, Luke uses two words which are very helpful. In English, the words are "vessel" and "sheet." Peter could see the docks from this rooftop. The Greek word for "vessel" (skeuos), was exactly the same word which was sometimes used to describe the tackle rigging of a sailing vessel. The word "sheet" (othone) literally means "fine linen." Pieces of this linen were torn in narrow strips and used to wrap the body of Jesus in preparation for burial. ² It was from this material that the finest sails were made.

Again this is Joppa, a world-class seaport. The docks of that day did not have the powerful cranes one would find at our waterfronts today. We know that when a vessel put into port, the sail was taken down and used as a cradle to lift heavy loads out of the hold of the ship. It was not uncommon for heavy animals to be removed from a sailing vessel in this manner. There are extant carvings of ships being unloaded in this manner.

The man to whom the book of Acts was written would understand this just the way Luke wrote it. The people who lived near the port cities had probably seen this event many times. It begins to make more sense to us when we discover some of the things that were so commonplace to the people of that day.

¹ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957) p. 604

² John R. Kohlenberger III, ed., *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984) p. 676

JOHN'S CLOTHING AND FOOD

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. Matthew 3:4-6

John the Baptist is mentioned in a special light in the New Testament. Modern readers however seem to have some difficulty identifying with him. This is due in part to his life-style - his clothes and his food.

His was a distinctive style of clothing to say the least:

The long hair of the camel, which is somewhat woolly in texture, becomes, toward the close of spring, loose, and is easily pulled away in licks from the skin. The modern Arabs still weave it into a coarse sort of cloth for tent covers and coats for shepherds and cameldrivers. Garments of this material were worn by John the Baptist in the wilderness.¹

There are a number of unanswered questions concerning this prophet:

1. How did the people of Jerusalem and Judea know that he was preaching out there in the wilderness? Why would he choose the wilderness as the place to preach the Gospel? Why not the temple?

It may have been that John had forsaken the comfort and evil of city life and moved to the sterner wilderness in order to escape the evil ways which characterized life in the city. We know for instance that this is what happened with the Essenes- a group who seem as austere as John and lived in the same area. Many scholars believe that John was a part of that group, at least for a short period of time.

Each of the Synoptic writers - Matthew, Mark and Luke - tell the story of John the Baptist. Both Matthew and Mark tell about His clothes and food. The picture of John the Baptist seems strange to us. What difference does the mention of his clothes and food make in relation to the meaning of this story? What would have been lost if the Gospels of Matthew and Mark had never mentioned the clothes or the food?

This is the first mention of John the Baptist in Matthew and Mark and the first mention of him anywhere in the Gospels since His birth in the other Gospel records. After 400 years of prophetic silence (which is exactly the same length of time Israel was enslaved in Egypt), God now speaks through John whose father was a Levitical priest serving in the Jerusalem temple. John, at least 30 years of age by now, should have been married, serving as an Aaronic Priest. He may well have been trained as a priest, but it is clear that he was not serving as such.

Both Matthew and Mark draw attention to the clothes worn by John the Baptist. John's attire was a garment made of camel hair, not camel skin. He also wore a leather belt. This differentiation is very clear in the Greek. Why would John wear such clothing

¹ Merrill F. Unger, v *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957) p. 169.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

as this? There were at least two good reasons for his avant-garde clothing. First, the New Testament goes to great lengths to identify John the Baptist with Elijah. The name "Elijah" in the New Testament is called "Elias." It is important to remember that the Jews believed that Elijah would return before the Messiah was revealed. This belief was based upon the following statement written by the prophet Malachi:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. Malachi 4:5

For this reason, the Jews still set a place for Elijah at their Passover table knowing that he must come before their Messiah comes.

On one occasion, Jesus spoke about John the Baptist in this manner.

And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Matthew 11:14

This statement would certainly have shocked the Jewish people to whom Jesus was speaking.

The reference to John the Baptist's clothing was not a casual statement. Notice what an Old Testament author said of Elijah:

They replied, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite." II Kings 1:8

The New Testament does not say so, but it seems probable that the clothing worn by John the Baptist was intended to have a symbolic significance. This fact would certainly not be wasted on his audience. Elijah was a strong prophet for the Lord at a time when the Jewish people had forgotten their covenant with God and were involved in a number of idolatrous and other evil schemes. This was again true during the ministry of John the Baptist. The people would remember that the message of Elijah and that of John the Baptist had a great deal in common. They both reprimanded the people for their sin and promised that God would destroy them and their land for this disobedience. Whatever other reasons may be involved, it is clear that the clothing John the Baptist wore was intended to tie his ministry to that of the great prophet Elijah.

The second reason behind the style of dress which John the Baptist had adopted was that this was what was worn by the poorest people of the realm. It was well-known that religious leaders identified with the well-to-do, not with the extremely poor. It was the well-to-do who made life so unbearable for the poor. That fact was not lost on John the Baptist's audience. There is little doubt that John the Baptist dressed in the same manner as Elijah on purpose. It also appears certain that he knew that he was the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

As we said earlier, both Matthew and Mark drew careful attention both to John the Baptist's dress and diet. Modern Americans cringe when they read these words,

"His food was locusts and wild honey." Matthew 3:4b

JOHN'S CLOTHING AND FOOD

The sound of a locust is threatening to us because of the tragic losses experienced by Americans on the western plains a generation or so ago. Just the thought of eating bugs is distasteful to most of us.

We should be reminded about what went through the minds of religious Jews when the idea of eating a locust was mentioned:

Of these (winged creatures) you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grass-hopper. But all other winged creatures that have four legs you are to detest. Leviticus 11:22, 23

Dr. Carson is helpful in this regard.

Locusts (akrides) are large grasshoppers, still eaten in the east, not the fruit of the locust tree. ²

That certainly clarifies the issue, I doubt, however, that it makes the whole experience much more palatable to Americans in general.

Again, why would Matthew and Mark stress the fact that this was John's daily diet? There are two good reasons for their reminder:

1. This is one more way to identify John the Baptist with Elijah. Not only did they wear the same clothes, they ate the same diet. It was a symbolic way to let the people know that this was a prophet after the style of Elijah.
2. It, again, was a way to endear John the Baptist to the poverty stricken people of the area. It was a reminder that though the religious leaders of the people catered to the rich, the prophet of God felt a kinship to the poorest of the poor. Everyone who knew about this diet would understand that message immediately.

There was also a figurative message in all of this as well. Dr. Unger helpfully reminds us of this:

It (the dress and diet) was an outward mark of that deadness to carnal enjoyment and mortification which marked John's mission as God's prophet in the apostasy of Israel. In this he imitated his great predecessor and type, Elijah (II Kings 1:8), in a time of similar degeneracy. ³

The clothes he wore and the food he ate testified to the evil way of life in which many of his people lived.

John the Baptist, by his dress and diet, vividly identified with the prophet Elijah, who must come before the Messiah comes, and also with the poorest of the poor in his land. We would never notice this, but the people who saw and heard him could not miss the par-

² Frank E. Gaebelin, Gen. Ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Volume 8, (Matthew, Dr. D. A. Carson), (Grand Rapids: Zandervon Publishing House, 1984) p. 102.

³ Merrill F. Unger, p. 169.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

allels. It was the evidence the people of Israel needed, if they would heed it, that the Messiah was coming.

GO IN AND OUT

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and out, and will find pasture. John 10:9

In this portion of John's Gospel, he quotes Jesus talking about Himself using two images:

1. I am the Light of the World
2. I am the Good Shepherd

In John 10:7-18, Jesus, on two occasions, refers to Himself as "the good shepherd." One only needs to speak of the "good" shepherd if there is a "bad" shepherd. These people were very familiar with the picture of the hireling in Ezekiel 34.

In the time of Jesus, there were three basic religious groups:

1. The Sadducees - the aristocrats
2. The Pharisees - originally the reformers
3. The Essenes - the radical purists

The Sadducees grew out of the priestly group in the time of Ezra. They were the pragmatists. To some extent, they collaborated with Rome. They accepted the Roman appointment of the High Priest, though it should have been an election by the Jews. The Sadducees received a commission on the money exchanged for bird and animal sales in the temple. This prompted Jesus to drive the money changers and those who sold animals out of the temple.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, came from among the Scribes. They were separatists. They originally stood for the very careful observance of the Law. This changed radically and in the time of Jesus became a rallying center for power and wealth in the guise of religiosity.

The Essenes came into being about the second century before Christ. This ascetic community felt the religious leaders, in Jerusalem, had abandoned the faith and went out into the desert regions to practice the true faith.

People who would not cooperate with the Sadducees were barred from the door of the synagogue. Look back at John, chapter 9, to see an illustration of this. Jesus had healed the man who was born blind. When the parents of this man were questioned, they would only say, "This is our son" and "He was born blind."

John goes on, however, to give an explanation as to why the parents were so unwilling to comment any more than they did:

His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'
John 9:22, 23

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

These Sadducees, bad shepherds, were willing to use force to get people to cooperate with their way of thinking and acting.

While the evil shepherds were busy keeping uncooperative people out of the synagogue, Jesus addressed the issue. Twice in the paragraph from which we just quoted, Jesus said, "I am the door." While Sadducees were busy keeping people out of the synagogue, Jesus was the door through whom the helpless could enter.

The people of Jesus' day understood this picture very well. In the desert area, sheep were kept in an enclosure beside the tent at night. In this part of Palestine, however, sheep were kept in the sheep-fold at night. It was an enclosure which was a totally walled-in area and sometimes was at the mouth of a cave to give protection from the cold of night. The shepherd himself slept in the doorway of this sheep-fold. A good shepherd was prepared to sacrifice himself for the good of the sheep. The bad shepherd was busy using and taking advantage of the sheep.

Speaking of himself as "the door," Jesus went on to explain:

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:9, 10

Everyone who heard Jesus knew that a good shepherd cares intimately for the needs of his sheep. The animals come into the fold for shelter and protection; they go out to find green pasture and food.¹

The people of Jesus' day were familiar with another image. Kings established their reputation by taking cities away from another king. This danger brought about "walled cities."

During the day and in peaceful times, the gates of the city could be left open. At night, however, and during times of great danger, the huge gates of the city were closed and barred. No one could come in or go out. A powerful king had the ability to have the city gates open and the people feeling secure.

Jesus was under attack for being a fraud: or worse, for having a demon. Jesus was explaining that He was willingly laying down His life for the benefit of the sheep, while the Sadducees were busy taking financial and political advantage of the people and keeping them from one of their most valued experiences -- the worship of God in the temple.

Again, the Jews would think of "go in and out" as something very specific in their culture. It was a way of describing peace in a nation; a way of describing security in the sheepfold. To us, it is a way of saying that in Jesus Christ we find the one who brings peace and security in a way that no earthly king has ever been able to duplicate.

¹ James Fleming, *I Am The Good Shepherd*, (Jerusalem: Biblical Resources, 1984) a tape

THE LAMB

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' John 1:29

Did you ever wonder why John called Jesus a "lamb"? It certainly was not the most flattering thing Jesus could be called. Sheep are very trusting, but not very bright. Agriculturists have told me that the lamb/sheep does not have a brain in its head. What brain it has, and it isn't much, is in the spinal column. Just why would John call Jesus a lamb?

The context of our text indicates that priests and Levites had been sent to find out just what John was doing that drew such great crowds to hear him. Jesus said, in Matthew 11:14, that John the Baptist was the Elijah who must come to prepare the way for the Messiah.

John preached a message of repentance from sin. In the midst of his denunciation of the sin of the people as well as the religious leaders, John saw Jesus and cried out, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John was speaking of Jesus, His second cousin.

John did not say, "Look, **the prince of Israel**, who will deliver us from the bondage of Rome". John said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John was specific as he described why Jesus had come. His emphasis was totally on Jesus' deliverance of the people from the sins about which he had been preaching.

The word "lamb", which John used was "amnos". There are at least two Greek words for "lamb" in the New Testament.

The use of amnos points directly to the fact, the nature and character of His sacrifice; arnion (only in the apocalypse) presents him on the ground, indeed, of His sacrifice, but in acquired majesty, dignity, honor, authority and power. ¹

John carefully chose the word he used to stress the sacrifice of Jesus rather than His majesty and power. This word "amnos" is used only four times in the New Testament:

1. John 1:29 - "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John was identifying Jesus.
2. John 1:36 - "Look, the Lamb of God!" John identified Jesus again.
3. Acts 8:32 - Philip attempted to explain Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian eunuch.
4. I Peter 1:19 - Jesus as Lamb without spot or blemish - the Paschal Lamb.

Of these four references, our text is the most prominent.

There is one other factor about the Lamb. This helpless creature may not be too bright, but it is known for the fact that it is the purest of the animals. There is no other animal for which the lamb is an enemy. The sheep will only drink from clear quiet water. That fact is truly characteristic/symbolic of the holiness and purity of Jesus. Jesus was as different

¹ John R. Kohlenberger III, Ed., *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), p. 637

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

from the pagan as the sheep was different from the pig. Just as the lamb would not drink from fouled, stirred up water, so Jesus lived His life in such a way that they could find no fault in Him.

Any Jew who heard John say these words would be reminded of an Old Testament situation which they knew very well. Abraham took Isaac and went to make a sacrifice to the Lord. Not knowing about God's command to Abraham, Isaac asked him where the sacrifice was. Abraham's response was very prophetic. He said,

My son, God will provide for himself a lamb for a burnt offering. Genesis 22:8a

The statement by John harks back to Abraham's words, when John said, "Look, the Lamb of God..." The phrase, "Lamb of God" really means the Lamb provided by God. This is precisely what both Abraham and John were saying.

Luke 9:51 indicates that Jesus voluntarily came to Jerusalem and to His death. The Old and New Testaments parallel Jesus with the Passover Lamb slain in Egypt on the night before the slaying of Egypt's firstborn sons and the beginning of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Jesus was the deliverer from sin and death just as the Paschal Lamb was the one who preserved the first-born alive and triggered the release of Israel from bondage.

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER

When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, 'Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.' Judges 11:34, 35

The stories in the book of judges are not the best known in the Bible. The story of Jephthah is a continual source of shock and confusion for many readers. People respond in shocked disbelief, "how could he make such a promise?" and "how could he do that to his own daughter?"

This was an era in Israel's history when things were going from bad to worse. God promised to give them the land of Canaan, but required that the residents be killed or driven out. Israel took the land, but did not remove the people. Their punishment was that God left the people to be a thorn in Israel's side and therefore Israel was being attacked and destroyed by her neighbors. It is amazing how often the punishment we receive for our disobedience is that we receive what we want.

Jephthah was an illegitimate child and his half brothers never let him forget it. They finally drove him away and he led a band of thieves. Leadership in Israel was so poor that Israel pleaded with Jephthah to be their leader. He agreed.

Things went well, at least for a while. When reverses came, Jephthah displayed a remarkable determination. Was it because he felt that his background and heritage demanded that he succeed? We can only conjecture. For whatever reason, Jephthah made a shocking covenant with God. Jephthah said,

...If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever(whoever) comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. Judges 11:30, 31

As Judges 11 indicates, God gave Jephthah victory over Ammon. Jephthah returned home in triumph. When he reached his home, he had to be shocked to see his only daughter come out to meet him.

The words of Jephthah make it clear, this was not what he had in mind when he made the vow. Notice his words,

When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, 'Oh! my daughter! you have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord and I can not break it. Judges 11:35

After giving her some time with her friends, Jephthah sacrificed his daughter as he promised God he would do.

A host of questions come to mind as we read this story. Why would Jephthah make a covenant at all? It was not a way to coerce God into doing something He would not oth-

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

erwise do. It probably seemed like Jephthah's only means to demonstrate to God that he was serious about his commitment.

If we update this a bit, it may be easier to understand. Many young soldiers have prayed as they lay in their foxhole under attack, "O God, if you get me through this alive, I promise I will be a minister." How many parents have stood by their infant's bedside as life began to slip away and cried out, "O God, save my baby's life and I will live for you everyday"? It is the cry of our weakness. It may well have been for Jephthah as well.

Why would Jephthah make this covenant? Granted, it seems inhumane, but it is not as cold hearted as it may seem. First, notice that the text says, "whatever" not "whoever." There are some variants which could be translated "whoever", but the weight of evidence favors "whatever." If that translation is correct, then Jephthah was not expecting a person to greet him. The word choice suggests a thing, not a person.

In the homes of families who had servants, the lowest servant in the house was assigned to greet people at the door and wash their feet. If a family had only one servant, that person greeted guests and washed their feet. Under no circumstances would a member of the family, especially a young woman, stoop to greeting guests at the door, or worse, go out to meet them.

As we indicated in the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus shocked His audience when he had the father in the story run out to welcome his son. That simply was totally unacceptable to the people of that day.

Jephthah was trying to make a reasonable promise to God that would demonstrate how important God was in his life. He had no idea that it would be so costly.

It is easy for us to ask questions about Jephthah's wisdom and intelligence. Not too many know the pain he felt before he made the vow, or the anguish he felt when he returned home in triumph.

Put yourself in his shoes for a minute. When your daughter came out to meet you, what, honestly, would you have done? Personally, when I read this story, I read it through tears. I can only stand in Jephthah's presence, hat in hand, wishing that my commitment were so deep.

DID DAVID DANCE NAKED BEFORE THE ARK?

David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might. II Samuel 6:14

When David returned home to bless his household, Michal, daughter of Saul, came out to meet him and said, 'How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!' II Samuel 6:20

Do you remember the first time you read this passage? Do you remember your reaction? I remember mine! I couldn't believe my eyes. I read it again. Sure enough, that is what it said. That can't be true!

Later I read II Samuel again. My reaction was a bit different - less disbelief, but a bit of cynicism. So who is surprised when royalty behaves like a two-year-old running out of the house in the altogether?! History is speckled with instances of that kind of royal misbehavior.

In more recent years, I have attempted to discover exactly what the author was trying to say. In my search, I translated the verses from the Hebrew. In II Samuel 6:14 the author identifies David's attire as a "linen ephod":

It was a sacred garment originally made for the High Priest (Ex. 28:4; 39:2). It was made of gold, blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twined linen, fastened by two shoulder pieces and woven band for a girdle for the ephod...The ephod may have extended below the hips or only to the waist. Under the ephod was the blue robe of the ephod reaching to the feet of the priest.

In times of crisis, the will of the Lord was sought through the ephod (cf. David in I Samuel 23:9; 30:7). In Israel both prophecy and the ephod were authorized means of ascertaining the will of God.¹

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia reminds us that others, beside priests, wore the ephod.

Typical of such attire as worn by ordinary priests (I Samuel 2:28; 14:3; 22:18) was the linen ephod that young Samuel wore as he assisted the aged priest Eli in ministering before the Lord.²

As you may know, Gideon made an ephod for himself of the gold that was given to him (Judges 8:26, 27). The issue which David's wife Michal seems to be raising is that of public nakedness. In the Old Testament nakedness was considered shameful, if not immoral. In Genesis 3:10, Adam and Eve hid themselves when they discovered that they

¹ R. Laird Harris, Ed., *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*, Volume 1, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) p. 143

² Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Gen. Ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 2, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982) p. 117

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

were naked. In Genesis 3:21, God made a covering of animal skins in order to cover the nakedness of our first parents.

In Genesis 9:22, Ham saw his father's nakedness and Ham's son Canaan was cursed because of it. This was very serious. We should remember that pagan cultures, like Rome, did not share the moral scruples of the strict, discrete Jews.

There is little further information about dress until the coming of the Greeks. They had fewer inhibitions about nakedness than the Jews, and this led to conflict between the two races. When Jason, a High Priest, cooperated with the occupying Greek forces in building a gymnasium near Jerusalem, there, Greek games could be played by Jewish boys who wore, like all Greek athletes, little or nothing.³

So what happened in Jerusalem when David brought the Ark of the Covenant back into the city? II Samuel 6:14 states that David wore a "linen ephod." What is an "ephod"? The word "ephod" means a covering. It is really composed of two parts:

The robe of the ephod was a garment different from the ephod itself. The robe was blue, sleeveless and fringed at the bottom with bells of gold and pomegranates of blue, gold, purple, and scarlet (Exodus 28:31-35; 39:22-26).⁴

In other words, the person wore a robe from head to foot. Over this robe was the lighter ephod. Kiel and Delitzsch speak of the ephod in these terms:

The white ephod was, strictly speaking, a priestly costume, although in the law it is not prescribed as the dress to be worn by them when performing their official duties, but rather as the dress which denotes the priestly character of the wearer (see at I Samuel 22:18); and for this reason it was worn by David in connection with these festivities in honor of the Lord, as the head of the priestly nation of Israel (I Samuel 2:18).⁵

David received the disdain of his wife Michal because of his conduct at the ceremony welcoming the Ark back into Jerusalem. She made it sound as though he danced naked in the streets like a scantily-clad dancer. The truth of the matter is that David was quite well covered. He had on an ankle length blue robe and the ephod over it, as the priests dressed. The thing he did not have on was his kingly robes. That appears to be the source of Michal's anger.

We must understand Michal's situation. The text identifies her as Saul's daughter, not David's wife, although she was indeed David's wife (I Samuel 18:27; 19:11; II Samuel 3:14). During Saul's reign, the Ark was not very important to him. It appears that in her childhood, Michal experienced little reverence for Jehovah, but probably saw some

³ J. A. Thompson, *Handbook Of Life In Bible Times*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1986) p. 104

⁴ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957) p.317

⁵ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Old Testament In Ten Volumes*, Volume 2, II Samuel, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982) p. 336

DID DAVID DANCE NAKED BEFORE THE ARK?

amount of idol worship. It is not surprising that she was distressed at David's exuberance over the return of the Ark.

Michal's ire was not over David's nakedness, but over the fact that David did three things:

1. He laid aside his royal robes, which identified him as the most honored person in the realm.
2. He put on the priestly robe and ephod by which he identified himself as the first priest of a priestly people.
3. David danced joyfully and energetically before the Ark -- the visible symbol of the location of God's presence. In Michal's mind, kings did not dance in public; rather, dancers performed for the king's delight.

David, the person of highest honor in the realm, assumed his rightful place before Jehovah, whom he dearly loved.

Think of David's conduct. He was a king and deserved royal respect. Rejoicing, however, at the entry of the Ark into the city, he felt that leading his people in praise to God was far more important than insisting on royal respect. Thus he lay aside his royal robes in favor of his servant role before God. It was greater, in his thinking, to be the priest leading people in worship, than to be the king.

It appears that God approved of David's conduct, but disapproved of Michal's. David was known as a "man after God's own heart" (I Kings 15:4, 5), but Michal remained childless, a great shame, all her days (II Samuel 6:23).

THE PROTECTION OF MY ROOF

'You are welcome at my house,' the old man said. 'Let me supply whatever you need. Only don't spend the night in the square.' So he took him into his house and fed his donkeys. After they had washed their feet, they had something to eat and drink...The owner of the house went outside and said to them, 'No my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing.' Judges 19:20, 21, 23

The progressive development of the hotel, boarding house and motel, and the appearance of thousands of restaurants and fast-food establishments all make the idea of hospitality of the sojourner a bit difficult for us to grasp. Nevertheless, it was an absolute necessity in the Near East, and is still practiced among desert people. Indeed, during the War in the Persian Gulf, servicemen were filmed receiving the courteous hospitality of Arab families in the desert.

This law of hospitality was commonly referred to as "under my roof."

In Judges 19, the Levite and his concubine were traveling and it was late in the day. As was the custom, Judges 19:15, they sat down in the street in the center of town. This was the announcement that they needed hospitality. An old man saw them and inquired concerning their need. He then accepted the responsibility for them and their needs.

The men of the city had been drinking and came beating on the old man's door. They demanded that he bring out the sojourner for sexual reasons. The man interceded because of his need to defend his guest. This was not a unique experience. If you remember the story of Lot, you know that the men of Sodom determined to tear down Lot's door and take the men who were under his roof in order to satisfy their perverted sexual desires.

In Psalms 94:6, the author pleads with God to judge and punish the wicked who "slay the widow and sojourner." These are helpless people. In Genesis 18:6-8, Abraham was the host to three angelic beings. He gave them a feast, not just the necessary provisions.

In Deuteronomy, the Law of Hospitality was restated:

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge...When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. Deuteronomy 24:17, 19

Moses has placed the sojourner on a par with the helpless widow and orphan. You will also find reference to this in Leviticus 19.

If you study Jesus' instructions to the 70 whom He sent out to witness throughout the land, you find, in Luke 10:1-12, that He makes it clear that these people are to use the Law of Hospitality to find food and shelter for the time they are to be gone. Jesus also gave them instructions as to their conduct while guests:

1. You are to give your peace to the home of your host.
2. You are to stay in the home that first receives you.
3. You are to eat and drink what the host gives you. You deserve your needs.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

4. Do not go from house to house trying to upgrade your accommodation.
5. You are to eat what is given to you without defense, trauma or complaint.
6. You are to heal the sick.

This must have been quite a shock for the 70 people. Jesus was talking about being a gracious guest, when the Law of the Desert did not require the recipient to even say "thank you." The hospitality was his due. It was not usually viewed as a kindness, but as an obligation. The Jews, Arabs, Romans and Greeks all dealt with this hospitality as a sacred obligation, not as the choice of a gracious host.

Hoffman, a Hebrew scholar of another era, comments on the situation with Lot's guest in these terms. He speaks of Lot saying:

Even today... an Easterner regards the duty of protecting his guest as sacred and above all other considerations. ¹

Because Lot had invited the angelic beings to accept his hospitality, he was under an oath to defend their safety and comfort with his very life.

The Arabs are under obligation to receive the "stranger" for three days. After that time the visitor is under suspicion:

The emphasis upon entertaining guests probably originated in nomadic life. Travel was seldom, if ever, for pleasure but rather because of necessity. One never knew when he would be dependent upon the hospitality of others. Therefore a stranger had the right to expect hospitable treatment. A visitor had no need even to thank his host, since he was only receiving what was due him. The host would provide for his guest housing, protection and food, if he arrived in time for the evening meal. (Many times, however, even if the visitor arrived too late and was not entitled to food, the host sought to provide for him [cf. Lu. 11:5 f.].) A murderer would find protection in the tent of his host even if the host were the victim's son. No expense or labor was too great for the traveler, who was treated as master of the house. ²

The old man in Judges 19, and Lot in Genesis 19, were not just being noble. They were obeying the Law of Hospitality, sometimes called the Law of the Desert.

This law, given by God, is just one more expression of the concern of God for those in precarious situations. It reveals again the great compassion of God for those who are so vulnerable. It says more about God than it does about the people involved.

¹ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, *Genesis, Volume 1*, (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1988) p. 684

² Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Gen. Ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 2, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) p. 105

AN EARNEST

...Who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory. Ephesians 1:14

The word translated "deposit" in the New International Version is translated "earnest" in the King James Version and a number of others. For some Christians, "the earnest of our inheritance" was just a first-century way of saying something, an embellishment of the Biblical author's idea. If someone were to ask, "What is an earnest?" many Christians could not explain it. As happens so often, what many Christians take as poetic expression was really the author's carefully chosen figure of speech. Until you discover the meaning of that figure of speech, you can never grasp the fullness of the author's intended message.

Among Biblical authors, only the Apostle Paul uses the image of "an earnest." He uses it three times - Ephesians 1:14; II Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5 - and in each instance, it is a reference to the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word that Paul used for "earnest" was "arrabon." Vine, in his expository dictionary, speaks of the "earnest" in these terms:

Originally, earnest-money deposited by the purchaser and forfeited if the purchase was not completed, was probably a Phoenician word, introduced into Greek. In general usage it came to denote a pledge or earnest of any sort; in the N.T. it is used only of that which is assured by God to believers; it is said of the Holy Spirit as the Divine pledge of all their future blessedness.¹

In modern business transactions, the word "earnest" is still used. We might say that it is a bit like an "option to buy".

Charles R. Erdman describes an "earnest" in this manner:

Now, an earnest was a portion of the purchase money given as the seal of a contract and so was a pledge of full payment. It was not only the seal, however. It was an installment, a part of the price, the same in kind as the full payment.²

Barclay said of an "arrabon":

It is an installment paid down in advance which is the proof and the pledge that the whole sum will in due course be forthcoming.³

¹ John R. Kohlenberger III, Ed., *The Expanded Vine's Dictionary Of New Testament Words*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984) p. 299

² Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle Of Paul To The Ephesians*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1929) p. 34

³ William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974) p. 58

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

It is one thing to discover the literal definition of a term. It is another to discover what that word meant to the people to whom it was written.

As we said earlier, each of the three references to the "earnest" has to do with the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying that the Holy Spirit is the "earnest;" He is the installment paid in advance to affirm that the entire balance will be paid -- and paid in full. The Holy Spirit is that which the Father gives us in order to enable us to comprehend, to some small degree, the full extent of the eternal glory that will one day be ours; to assure us that our inheritance is secure and that this small part of the real thing will be ours in full measure when the time of closing comes. Because the Holy Spirit is the "earnest," it means that what we grasp of His presence is a small token of the reality which is thereby pledged to us and made certain of delivery to all those who are in Christ Jesus. As Erdman says, the Holy Spirit, as the earnest of our inheritance, indicates the nature of the future life that we will live in glory.

Vine reminds us that the word "arrabon" in modern Greek is used to describe an engagement ring. The ring is not the promise. It is the assurance; the visible evidence that the promise will be fully kept.

In II Corinthians and Ephesians, Paul uses the word "earnest" to speak about the Holy Spirit:

1. **Ephesians 1:14** - The Holy Spirit is the deposit, a taste of the real thing, it assures us; it guarantees our inheritance which is in heaven and is eternal.
2. **II Corinthians 1:22** - The Holy Spirit is God's seal of ownership on us and God put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, an earnest, an assurance that the future is as secure as the Spirit of God who dwells within; as rich as His indwelling presence.
3. **II Corinthians 5:5** - God has given us His Holy Spirit as a deposit, an assurance that all will be paid and that what has been given is only a taste of the reality that the future holds for us.

The presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit is only a down payment; an assurance in kind of what the full beauty of glory will be like. If the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit is merely an earnest, a down payment guaranteeing the nature and extent of what glory will be, imagine what heaven, our eternal presence with God will be like?

We must also be aware of the fact that though the Holy Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, the earnest is as real as the inheritance it represents, just not yet in full measure. That being the case, one can hardly wait!

PETER ON THE ROOFTOP

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. Acts 10:9

Our discoveries in this instance will probably not correct an error in our thinking, but it should add breadth to our understanding.

This is the story of Cornelius the Centurion. This Roman officer was very well known and dearly loved by the Jewish people. Unlike many other Roman officials, he was very kind to the Jewish people under his care. He was also very generous to the Jewish religious groups and synagogues. This has led some to believe that he may have had a Jewish mother or that he was a low level inquirer concerning the Jewish faith.

This centurion, from the Roman city of Caesarea, had a vision directing him to go to Joppa, some 30 miles to the south, to find a man named Simon Peter. Cornelius, with two escorts, made the trip. The text indicates that they arrived at Joppa about noon. The passage tells us that Peter was the house guest of Simon the Tanner. Luke tells us that this house was by the sea. Simon was probably a Jew. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia adds a helpful piece of information.

...(Simon) a tanner with whom Peter lodged at Joppa (Acts 9:43; 10:6, 17, 32). His house was by the seaside, probably segregated from the Jewish community, because tanning was an unclean trade (cf. Leviticus 11:39f).¹

The reference to Leviticus contains this idea:

If an animal that you are allowed to eat dies, anyone who touches the carcass will be unclean till evening. Leviticus 11:39

Because a tanner worked with dead animals, he was perpetually unclean and ostracized from the Jewish community. This tells us something very important about Peter. By staying in the tanner's home, Simon Peter would also be considered unclean. Nevertheless, Peter chose to accept Simon's hospitality. This was a major departure from Peter's usual activities:

Strict Jews believed that God had no use for the Gentiles. Sometimes they even went to the length of saying that help must not be given to a Gentile woman in childbirth, because that would only be to bring another Gentile into the world.²

Was Simon the Tanner a Christian? The text does not say, but it is reasonable to conjecture that he was. Until this time Peter had stayed an appropriate distance from any

¹ Geoffrey Bromiley, Gen. Ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 4 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) p. 516

² William Barclay, *The Acts Of The Apostles, The Daily Study Bible Series*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977) p. 80

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

Gentile if at all possible. He had probably never met a Gentile or visited a Gentile city before becoming a disciple of Jesus. Because Simon the Tanner was a Jew, Peter was able to associate with him. In all probability because Simon the Tanner was a Christian, Peter could overlook the stigma of the uncleanness of a tanner's home and stay there anyway.

Did you ever wonder why Peter was on the housetop when Cornelius, the Centurion, arrived? There are at least three good reasons for this:

1. The text clearly states that it was noon. (Some translations say "the sixth hour". This is one of the hottest times of the day. The roof of this home by the sea would be the coolest place in the house.
2. The text also indicates that Peter was praying. Noon was the time of the "noon prayers" which was observed by the strictest Jews. Peter was one of these and certainly took time to daily pray at noon. The Jews considered the tanning trade to be dishonorable and Simon was thus poorly-paid as well. If this is true, then Simon's house, on the fringe of the Jewish community, was also probably very small, perhaps a single room. To pray without distraction in such a setting might be difficult at best.
3. The text also indicates that Peter was a guest of Simon the Tanner. The only place for a guest chamber in such a home was the roof.

You may remember, from the discussion concerning "the inn" that the Greek word for "guest-chamber" was "kataluma." The Greek word that Luke used to describe Simon's roof, however, was "doma." Why are they different? The most accurate answer is, we do not know. It is very possible that the place usually called "kataluma" is here called "doma" because this particular roof would not have been as nicely appointed as a "kataluma" would be. It is understandable that a tanner's financial situation would dictate this.

The word "doma" means literally "to build." It came to be identified with a rooftop, but not necessarily a "kataluma" or "guest chamber."

This whole story says some remarkable things about the growth of the Apostle Peter. He went from not speaking to Gentiles to accepting the hospitality of the outcast tanner and going to the home of the Gentile, Cornelius, in order to minister to his family. And all of this occurred in a very short period of time. It is marvelous what God can do in the heart of a committed disciple.

THIEVES IN SCRIBE'S CLOTHING

They devour widow's houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely. Luke 20:47

Throughout much of His ministry, Jesus was challenging the attitudes and practices of religious leaders rather than those of the publicans and sinners. Jesus' most scathing accusations were directed toward these religious leaders. In Matthew chapter 23, Jesus delivered his most caustic attack against them. Seven times Jesus assumes a prophetic role:

Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites... Matthew 23:13

This indictment is repeated in Matthew 23:15, 16, 23, 25, 27 and 29. The attack must have infuriated these haughty religious leaders.

In Luke 20, the scribes, chief priests and elders challenged Jesus' authority. Luke tells us in Luke 20:20 that the chief priests and elders sent spies to try to find something with which to accuse Jesus. These religious leaders asked whether they should pay taxes to Caesar or not. Again, the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, tried to trap Him by asking whose wife a barren woman would be in the resurrection.

It was at this point that Jesus urged His disciples to beware of the scribes. Jesus used six descriptive statements which form a stinging indictment against the scribes:

1. They desire to walk in long robes. This is to give the twin impressions of wealth and great importance.
2. They love salutations in the marketplace. This is the intense desire to be held in high respect by everyone.
3. They long for the chief seats in the synagogues. The first row seats in front of the ark, in the Jewish synagogue, were reserved for religious leaders and other important guests. This honor was very important to the Scribes.
4. They craved the chief seats at the different feasts. Again, their driving urge for attention controlled their lives.
5. They devour widow's houses. This was a way to describe taking advantage of the helpless.
6. They pray long prayers for a pretense.

Notice that all six accusations are in the plural. These were not isolated incidents. They happened in the lives of a host of scribes in a multitude of different settings.

Notice that five of the six accusations deal with the scribes' urgent desire to be known as people of wealth, power and position. The one exception is a blistering attack on them both from the religious and social perspectives. Notice how Jesus said it,

Who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. Luke 20:47

This is an attack on their hypocrisy. They were hardened to the plight of the widows, but made long prayers pretending to be pious.

Jesus said,

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

... Who devour widows' houses... Luke 20:47

The word "devour" is extremely graphic. It is an intensive form:

...signifies (a) to consume by eating to devour. It is said of birds, Matthew 13:4; of the dragon, 12:4, of a prophet eating a book. Revelation 10:9, 10¹

It is an incredible picture and Jesus describes the actions of the scribes in very graphic terms. They devour the helpless widows' (plural) homes like a ravenous animal would gorge down its first meal in many days.

Jesus did not spell out this crime against the widows, but everyone who listened to Him knew exactly what He was talking about. It was not permissible for a scribe to charge for his services. He was to have another vocation by which to sustain himself and his family. As spiritual life deteriorated in Israel, these religious leaders took advantage of their positions in two tragic ways:

Josephus, who was himself a Pharisee, says of certain times of intrigue in Jewish history, that the Pharisees valued themselves highly upon their exact skill in the law of their fathers, and made men believe that they, the Pharisees, were "highly favored by God" and that "they inveigled" certain women into their schemes and plottings. The idea behind this seems to be this. An expert in the law could take no pay for his teaching. He was supposed to have a trade by which he earned his daily bread. But these legal experts had managed to convey to the people that there was no higher duty and privilege than to support a rabbi in comfort, that, in fact such support would undoubtedly entitle him or her who gave it to a high place in the heavenly academy.²

The commentator, John P. Lange, suggests the second avenue through which the greed of these officials worked:

...In the sphere of philanthropy, where they devoured widows' houses while they pretended to advance their interests.³

This was accomplished by taking advantage of poor widows. When left without visible means of support, by the death of her husband, a widow could be trapped. She could be left with nothing except her home and her little children. Under the apparent guise of trying to be helpful, the scribes would offer to lend her an adequate amount that she needed for food and other necessities. When the debt came due, she could not pay. The scribes would then take her home, or her children, or both, in payment of the debt. The travesty of

¹ John R. Kohlenberger III, Ed., *The Expanded Vine's Dictionary Of New Testament Words*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984) p. 299

² William Barclay, *The Gospel Of Mark*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976) p. 300

³ Philip Schaff, Ed., *Commentary On The Holy Scriptures, Luke*, John Peter Lange, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House p. 313

THIEVES IN SCRIBE'S CLOTHING

justice was that the scribes knew that she couldn't pay and counted on being able to take her home and children away from her in court.

There were obvious moral problems in all this. The scribes, like no one else in all Israel, knew the Law. One very well known law in Israel was this:

Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. Exodus 22:22-24

It was outright disobedience to the command of God for anyone in Israel to afflict widows or other helpless individuals. The scribes got around this by a technicality, but they knew very well that this was a glaring disobedience to the command of God.

In Deuteronomy you will find these words:

He(God) defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens for you yourself were aliens in Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:18, 19

The Scribes knew this passage by heart. They knew that their cold calculating schemes were in direct conflict with the plan and actions of God. God's plans for the helpless - widows, the fatherless and sojourners - were elaborate.

At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. Deuteronomy 14:28, 29

All the tithe Israel had stored up was to be made available to the Levites as well as the widows, the fatherless and sojourners.

God made elaborate plans to provide a way for the helpless to live and survive. The scribes plotted legal ways to take away everything God had given these helpless people.

There is no question about Jesus' words to His disciples:

Beware of the Teachers of the Law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogue and have the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely. Luke 20:46, 47

THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and elders. Matthew 27:3

The phrase "30 pieces of silver" or "30 silver coins" appears only five times in the Bible. These references are:

Zechariah 11:12 Matthew 26:15
Zechariah 11:13 Matthew 27:3
Matthew 27:9

All three New Testament references deal with Judas and his arrangement with the Jewish religious leaders concerning the betrayal of Jesus.

When people read these passages, it may appear to them that the number "30" was simply a financial agreement arrived at by two interested parties. There is no Biblical statement to deny this possibility.

It is interesting, however, that "30 pieces of silver" just happened to be the price agreed upon for Judas to betray Jesus. It also happened to be the going price for the purchase of a slave at that time.

"Thirty pieces of silver were, according to Exod. 21:32, the price of a slave. Hence in Zech. 11:12, the price at which the Shepherd of nations is valued, was thirty pieces of silver. The literal fulfillment of this word should not make the round sum suspicious. We should rather assume that the Sanhedrin designedly, and with cunning irony, chose the price of the slave in Exod. 21."¹

Knowing this, did the Sanhedrin set the price intentionally to coincide with the price of a slave or did it just work out that way? Lange makes it clear he believes that it was deliberate. He goes on to say,

But Jerome did not see, nor any of the Fathers, that thirty pieces of silver was the regular price for the life of a slave, which explains this sum in our case as a deliberate insult of the Sanhedrin to our Lord who died the death of a slave and a malefactor, that He might redeem us from the slavery and eternal misery of sin.²

"30 pieces of silver" is not an outstanding price for which to betray a person to death. That being the case, it appears questionable that one can properly substantiate the idea that this was just a financial arrangement.

¹ Philip Schaff, Ed., (*Commentary On The Holy Scriptures*, Matthew, By John Peter Lange, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co.) p. 464

² Ibid., p. 464

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

On the other hand, the fact that Jesus was sold for the price of a slave was more than an interesting coincidence. Jesus was not only treated as a common criminal, he was also treated as the lowest level of humanity, the least valuable of slaves.

A person in that culture would most certainly make this connection without being reminded of the cost of a slave. In our culture, that would not be known and would thus be glossed over in reading.

Matthew obviously knew about the cost of a slave. The inclusion of this piece of information was a quiet way for Matthew to point out the fact that Jesus was not only submitted to unbelievable humiliation and rejection, but was also treated with less respect than the average slave.

A COVENANT OF SALT

Don't you know that the Lord, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt? II Chronicles 13:5

There are only two specific references to a covenant of salt in the Old Testament, but a host of references where the Jewish mind would understand that this was the author's intent. I thought of the "covenant of salt" as a fancy way to describe the actions of Old Testament people. This phrase describes something quite specific in the Hebrew mind. In Leviticus, the author specifically instructs Israelites to include salt with every sacrifice they made to Jehovah:

Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings. Leviticus 2:13

Salt was one of the most valuable possessions in the Israelite homes. Their very best was a part of every sacrifice they made.

The people of the Near East used salt in a number of ways. It was their best, and in some instances, their only means of preserving food. Salt would thus be associated with preservation and longevity. It is not surprising that God chose to use salt in accordance with each sacrifice. There is the obvious suggestion that the covenant, inherent in the sacrifice, be an enduring one. Because of salt's obvious qualities of preservation, it was used symbolically to suggest that the two parties of a covenant eat salt together and in so doing establish a relationship that was enduring.

Salt was also an excellent cleansing agent. It was used to cleanse wounds and to retard the operation of bacteria in food. It is therefore not surprising that God chose to insist that every sacrifice include some salt as a reminder of the need to be pure in one's relationships with God.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia identifies still other uses of salt:

When men ate together they became friends. cf. The Arabic expression, "There is salt between us." ¹

If two people ate together, if they shared salt, they were considered friends. A friend was not only someone you could trust, but also one who would be like family; one whom you could trust never to attack you.

If you ate with a person, shared salt with him/her, it was a message to the community concerning the relationship between the two:

'He has eaten my salt' which means partaking of hospitality which cemented friendship; cf. 'eat the salt of the palace.' (Zero 4:14).²

¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Gen. Ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 1, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) p. 794

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

The "salt of the palace" had at least two connotations. To eat at the palace acknowledged a friendship with the king. It also identified the fact that there was an enduring friendship which may not have been seen as dependable previously.

Just as every sacrifice included salt, as previously described, so covenants between individuals were sealed at a meal which included salt:

Covenants were generally confirmed by sacrificial meals and salt was always present.³

A "salt covenant" was one in which the two parties had shared in a sacrificial meal and shared salt together. There are two parts to the meaning of this. The sacrificial meal was a reminder to both of them that they entered into this together with God. Secondly, it was a reminder that salt covenants could never be broken. It was a symbol to all present that the covenant was indeed confirmed and would not be broken:

Covenanting parties were accustomed to partake of salt, to make the covenant a covenant of salt..., ie., inviolably sure.⁴

This is what was being suggested in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter:

Don't you know that the Lord, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt? II Chronicles 13:5

Salt was very important in the Jewish community.

Treaties were sealed with salt... The Talmud says, 'The world can get along without pepper, but it cannot get along without salt.

In present-day Israel, the mayor of Jerusalem often greets distinguished visitors at the entrance of the city with an offering of bread and salt. Arabs, to this day, seal agreements with bread and salt.⁵

This gives us some impression of just how pervasive the idea of salt has been down through the centuries to the whole Near East region.

In the book of Numbers, Moses is describing not only the responsibilities but also the rewards of the priests. In that process he quotes God:

Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings the Israelites present to the Lord I give to you and your sons and daughters as your regular share. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for both you and your offspring. Numbers 18:19

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957) p. 224

⁵ Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book Of Why*, (Middle Village: Jonathan David Press, 1988) p. 328

A COVENANT OF SALT

God is assuring them that the agreement to give them these blessings was as sure as His word. He chose to symbolize that by referring to it as a "covenant of salt."

Jesus, of course, was quite conversant with both the Old Testament and the customs of His people. It is not surprising that He referred to the covenant of salt when He said:

Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other. Mark 9:50

As we indicated previously, the idea of salt conveyed a number of symbolic meanings to the Jewish mind of that day:

1. A cemented friendship
2. An enduring quality of life
3. An agent of preservation
4. A cleansing agent
5. A symbol of dependability

A more literal translation of the intent of Jesus might be:

...Have and keep on having salt in yourself and be at peace and keep on being at peace with others.' Mark 9:50

There is every reason to believe that Jesus had these symbolic ideas in mind when He gave this command. If that is true, Jesus was saying that we should establish a dependable, never-ending friendship with ourselves so that we can establish the same kind of relationship with others. That is peace!

JUST SAY THE WORD

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: 'Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'go,' and he goes; and that one 'come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'do this,' and he does it.' Luke 7:6b-8

Most of us have wondered why the centurion would not want every opportunity to be as close to Jesus as possible. Why wouldn't he want Jesus to do any miracle He was willing to do. Teachers have said that this was an example of the great faith of the centurion. There is absolutely no doubt that the centurion was a man of great faith. That is not, however, enough to cause him to deal with such a crisis in this seemingly casual way.

We have also heard teachers and preachers say that the centurion did this because as a leader he knew just how busy a leader can be and that he was just being considerate of Jesus. It is true that a centurion would be very sensitive to just how busy a leader can be. By the same token, the centurion felt the pressure of a desperate situation. All of this does not account for the way the centurion dealt with a time of great crisis.

In each of these scenarios I was left with an uncomfortable feeling. It just seemed that there had to be a better answer. As I pondered the situation, I noticed some hints that might prove to be helpful.

The centurion had built a synagogue for the Jews. That was totally out of character for the Romans. They were in the habit of taking, not giving. It could be that he was a most considerate man. If so, he would probably be the only Roman official who felt that way. This idea of consideration is possible, but not probable.

Some would say that the centurion was a secret convert to Judaism. This is the more probable of the two possibilities. The hint here is that this centurion was a man who was probably deeply religious.

The second hint came as I realized that this high Roman official was deeply concerned about a sick slave. Slaves were considered property, like disposable furniture. His demise would not create impossible financial strain for anyone. The hint here is that this centurion was a compassionate man. This would be a shock to everyone in Palestine. Neither station nor position mattered to him when a man, even a slave, experienced pain and danger to life. This commitment was quite a statement about a man whose training and business was death.

The third hint I noticed was that the centurion, who cared so much, sent Jewish Elders to request Jesus' help for his ailing servant. What other Roman official would take that chance? In his position, the centurion could expect anyone to receive him and honor his request. Still he chose to send Jewish Elders to make the request. The hint, in this instance, was the fact that this man had earned the love and approbation of people of whom he would otherwise have been considered an enemy.

No amount of reflecting on these hints was sufficient to make one feel comfortable that the keys to this passage had been found.

Only after many years did I discover that there was some additional information, which I had known but had never applied to this situation.

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

1. It is common knowledge that Jews were to have no dealings with Gentiles. It is reasonable to assume that the centurion was aware of the problem he would have caused Jesus by going to Him personally to request His help for his servant. This would never have been a problem for Jesus, but we have no way to be certain that the centurion had personal knowledge of Jesus' openness in this direction. Jewish Elders, however, were required, because of their position, to have dealings with the Roman officials. The centurion knew he could save Jesus an awkward situation by sending Jewish friends to request that Jesus minister to his servant. This is in keeping with what we have already seen of his compassion and consideration.

2. We also know that if a Jew entered the home of a Gentile, he would thereby become unclean. This would help to explain why the centurion sent some more friends to intercept Jesus before He got close enough to enter the centurion's home in order to heal the servant. Again, this fits what we already know about the centurion's concern and compassion. It also matches his sensitivity to the limitations which applied to the lives of devout Jews.

It is not surprising that Jesus could say, with so much strength and conviction,

I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel. Luke 7:9b

This was a phenomenal compliment on the part of Jesus. This Gentile, who had been trained to worship his emperor, had clearly made some stands on behalf of his own commitment to the God of Israel. His compassion was so intense that he was able to be concerned for Jesus in the midst of his own tension and potential for loss.

One of the telling ideas that has stayed with me in recent days has to do with how I would respond if I were the centurion. Would I be able to be sensitive to the needs of the healer when my servant needed healing so badly? Would I have the time to show compassion when I was all excited about my own needs? This has a way of putting life in perspective for us.

WHERE ARE MY SHOES?

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.... When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses, Moses' And Moses said, 'Here I am.' 'Do not come any closer' God said, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' Exodus 3:1-5

We know the burning bush story so well that we tend to skip it or not take it seriously. Therefore, it is easy to miss what God is saying about Himself and His people. Open your Bible and read Exodus 3, 4 and then we can share together.

When did this experience happen? Several Biblical experiences are precisely pinpointed, but not this one. In the midst of the dreariness of everyday life, God spoke to Moses. Accustomed to the busyness of big city life, the noisy palace activity, the sumptuous royal surroundings, the best of everything: this former prince was now all alone with animals for company, the craggy mountains for a vista and silence for entertainment. The heir apparent to the throne of Egypt had become a shepherd for a priestly family. Did these sudden changes have an effect on Moses? Does the sun rise every morning? It was in these surroundings that God spoke to a forgotten man.

Moses did not go crying to God; God came to him in the midst of his nightmare of meaninglessness. The burning bush was just to get Moses' attention. The real issue was not unconsumed burning bushes, but the fact that God spoke to a forgotten man. It was a very personal encounter. God called Moses by name.

In two ways God emphasized His royal, revered presence:

1. God told Moses not to come closer (even in intimacy, God is still awesome).
2. God told Moses to take off his shoes.

This was an expression of awe and reverence. God was helping Moses to realize that wherever he was, in God's presence, it was holy ground. Using the name "elohae", which stresses His mercy, God identified Himself in four different ways:

1. I am the God of your father. The one who was able to keep you alive against Pharaoh's command.
2. I am the God of Abraham who promised to take him to a land, and I did.
3. I am the God of Isaac, who promised his seed would be like the sand of the seashore, and it was.
4. I am the God of Jacob, the one who forgave him of all his "heelgrabbing" ways, and I did.

In God's speaking we glimpse something of His glory. God demonstrated His awareness saying, "I have seen the affliction of my people." God divulged His great concern saying, "I am come down to deliver." God revealed His divine generosity when He promised to give them " a land of milk and honey."

DID YOU KNOW THIS?!

God came to Moses with a task for him to perform. He sent Moses to deliver Israel from an impossible situation. God often sends very common people to do uncommon tasks.

Moses was certain that there was a mistake. God couldn't want him to do that. People wouldn't listen to him; he wasn't a speaker, the Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him. Besides, he was a wanted man in Egypt. His "reasons" were endless. Gideon and Isaiah both had lists like that. Somehow, these are the people God can use best. Moses suffered, not from lack of ability, but because he could not act upon what he already knew about God.

God has always spoken to common people, calling them to do uncommon tasks. God never changes. All that God was and did in the Old Testament, He still is and does. In the "everydayness" of your life, God torches a bush in your kitchen, office or work-bench and reaches out for your zeal and commitment.

God does not call every person to be a Moses, a David, an Esther, Deborah or Paul. God does call every servant of His to serve Him with abandon. God calls modern, common people to do equally uncommon service. You and I are common people. What is the uncommon task to which He calls us? Our bush is burning. How will we answer that call?

CONCLUSION

When theologians talk about the inspiration of Scripture, they are usually speaking of the action by which the Holy Spirit works through the skill and personality of the writer to convey God's revelation of Himself to people. This is a vital part of that understanding. You can see this in the logic of Paul that is so obvious in the epistle to the Romans. It is also obvious in the immediacy of the Gospel of Mark, which is evident in none of the other three Gospel records. What other Gospel record has the human and medical sensitivity that you find in the Gospel of Luke?

When we talk about inspiration, we also mean that God, by the Holy Spirit, reveals Himself and His will through the facility and characteristics of the language in which it was conveyed. The romantic, emotional Hebrew language is a perfect vehicle by which to describe the character of God as He revealed Himself in the historical record of the lives of Old Testament personages. Likewise, God revealed the intricate detail of His personality and His will for our lives through the deft precision of the Greek language. This is most obvious in the epistles.

We are beginning to realize that we are only scratching the surface in our understanding of what is involved in the inspiration of the Scripture. God, by the Holy Spirit, used the cultural mores and understandings as a means to reveal Himself and His will for the lives of His people. This book is a series of illustrations of this truth.

The church has been documenting a regression in the understanding of Scripture. Over a century ago, the church struggled because the people outside the church were Biblically illiterate. In the early part of this century there was a gradual drift away from Biblical preaching and teaching in some segments of the church. In more recent times this decline has pervaded an increasing segment of the church until, in some places, a pastor cannot use a Biblical illustration without explaining it. This is because major segments of the congregation would not know what the pastor was talking about.

We need to change directions in the church. We need to gain a deeper grasp of the basic understandings of the Bible. We need to teach the Scriptures to many who have been a part of the church all their lives. We must also teach the Scriptures to the people who have recently become followers of Jesus.

As we discover the meaning of Scripture and the additional clarity which these cultural details provide, it must make a measurable difference in our Christian lives. As we increase our knowledge of Scripture, we also seriously increase our potential for knowing God more completely. Catching a clearer glimpse of God, we open ourselves to a dramatic discovery of His will for our lives. Again, as we discover God's will more clearly, we can become open to the possibility of becoming both useful in His kingdom, and also of growing as obedient disciples.

An understanding of the words and phrases highlighted in this book can clarify our grasp of God's revelation of Himself and His will for our lives.

We hope that you will continue to delve more deeply into the Word of God. We also hope you will discover even more of the intricate detail of God's revelation of Himself and His will.